

# Colour nomenclatures across African languages

A study review with a focus on Hausa and Swahili

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This review article aims to provide an overview of the works published in the last decades on colour terminology and categorisation in some African languages<sup>1</sup>, and Hausa and Swahili in particular. It gives information about different African languages (Ndebele, Setswana, Xhosa, Chichewa, Egyptian-Coptic, Himba and Chakali), then it traces the main works covering the area of Hausa and Swahili language, from the earliest papers until now. Even though these languages have a rich tradition of studies, the amount of works devoted to colour naming is fairly limited. The theoretical approaches of the studies that have appeared in the last few decades are rather heterogeneous, and include perspectives from lexical semantics, cognitive semantics and sociolinguistics.

**Keywords:** colour terms; colour categorisation; African languages; Hausa; Swahili

## 1. Introduction

Over the years many scholars have been trying to explain the way in which colours are named in different languages. The theoretical approaches underlying the research conducted hitherto can be traced back to two approaches: the relativist and the universalist. Relativism is usually associated with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (henceforth SWH) developed by Edward Sapir (1929) and his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1950; 1956). While the universalistic view is associated with the theory developed by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay (1969), the Basic Colour Terms Theory (henceforth BCTT). Several linguists added new elements to these two positions by criticising or supporting one of them and others attempted to reconcile them with alternative theories.

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the works that have appeared in recent decades focusing on semantic colour categorisation in African languages, outlining the main linguistic areas

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<sup>1</sup> These languages are just a small sampling chosen on the availability of studies related only to colour nomenclature and categorization.

concerned and the theoretical approaches adopted<sup>2</sup>. A section will be devoted to the analysis of this area of studies in the fields of Hausa and Swahili language.

To better understand the theoretical approaches it is necessary to introduce some notions. When we talk about African languages, very often we mention ‘ideophones’ that are “marked words that depict sensory imagery. To say that ideophones are MARKED means that they stand out from ordinary words. To say that they are WORDS means that they are subject to conventionalization. To say that ideophones are DEPICTIVE means that they employ a depictive mode of representation which invites people to experience them as performances and which lends them their imagistic semantics. Finally, to say that ideophones depict SENSORY IMAGERY means that they draw on perceptual knowledge derived from events of sensory perception” (Dingemanse 2011: 25, 29; emphasis in the original). We also refer to ‘reduplication,’ i.e. “systematic repetition of phonological material within a word for semantic or grammatical purposes” (Rubino 2005: 11).

## 2. Main theories on colour categorisation

In order to understand the relativist point of view and the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,” it is useful to introduce the basic ideas of Sapir and Whorf’s vision. Their theories started to circulate in the first half of the 20th century.

In “The Status of Linguistics as a Science,” Sapir (1929) suggested that language is a guide to the scientific studies of a culture, a guide to ‘social reality’ because there aren’t two languages so similar that can be representative of the same social reality. Language, therefore, is considered as an access point for a deeper understanding. Actually, it was one of Sapir’s students, Benjamin Lee Whorf, who introduced the pivotal concept of linguistic relativity (Whorf 1950).

The main features of SWH are:

- Linguistic determinism: shapes the thought, i.e. the way we talk determines the way we think;
- Linguistic relativity: differences among languages are representative of different world-views;
- Linguistic relativism: there are no superior or inferior languages, as they are all equal.

On the other hand, universalism in the field of colour terminology is linked to the Basic Colour Terms Theory developed by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay in 1969. They carried out a research based on the

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<sup>2</sup> The author of the present review took into account all the theories and papers published in the last decades. Still, it doesn’t mean she agrees with all of them. In some instances, she does not even consider a theory as such; however, the author firmly thinks necessary to include any opinion in this paper in order to outline the path of studies so far.

analysis of 20 languages. First of all they defined the concept of *basic colour term*. Each basic colour term, to be considered as such, should have some characteristics (it must be mono-lexemic; its signification must not be included in that of any other colour term; its applicability must not be restricted to a narrow class of objects; and it must be salient for informants).

Thanks to their results, they were able to provide some evidences:

- colour categorization is not random and the centers of basic colour terms are very similar in all languages;
- variability in the location of colour foci appears to be greater among the speakers of a given language than between languages (1969: 8)
- there appears to be a fixed sequence of evolutionary stages through which a language must pass as its basic colour vocabulary becomes enriched over times (1969: 11);
- there appears to be a positive correlation between general cultural complexity (and/or level of technological development) and complexity of colour vocabulary (1969: 13).

Rosch (1973) added a new perspective to the BCTT and universal categories. She claimed that colour categories develop around perceptually salient ‘natural prototypes.’ In support of this thesis, she showed that subjects can learn natural prototypes faster than other stimuli and that they can learn hue concepts more easily when the presumed natural prototypes are the central members of categories.

She also tagged colours of greatest salience and verbal definitiveness within a colour category, *focal colours*, that have the capacity to semantically “attract” adjacent colours of the colour continuum (Maclaury, Paramei and Dedrick 2007: 56).

Wierzbicka (1990) proposed a new evolutionary sequence of colour categories divided up in seven stages. She stated that all the categories were presented in terms of certain prototypes which relate colour perception to universals of human existence (1990: 145). She therefore solved one of the factors that critics considered ambiguous in Berlin and Kay’s sequence. Actually, while Berlin and Kay used the same term, for example *BLACK*, in different stages with different meanings, in her model, she presented each category, for example *MACRO-BLACK*, in different ways for every single level.

Besides, in Wierzbicka’s model the development of new basic colour terms is presented in terms of differentiation of complex concepts rather than in terms of an emergence of new foci (Wierzbicka 1990: 145).

In the last years these two hypotheses seem to have lost their strength in favour of an approach aiming at reconciling both. Recent studies tend to consider them as two sides of a coin, as they can co-exist.

### 3. Colour terminology in some African languages

The issue of colour nomenclature and its categorisation in African languages has been taken into account by several scholars (Wescott 1970; van Beek 1977; Maffi 1990; Prasse 1999; Tosco 1999; Roulon-Doko 2019). In the last decades, as regards Bantu languages, Ian Davies and Greville G. Corbett provided informations about colour categories in Ndebele [nde; nort2795]<sup>3</sup> (Davies, Davies and Corbett 1994), Setswana [tsn; tswa1253] (Davies, Corbett, McGurk and Jerrett 1994b), Xhosa [xho; xhos1239] (Davies and Corbett 1994c), and Chichewa [nya; nyan1308] (Davies, Corbett, Mtenje and Sowden 1995).

Ndebele (Davies *et al.* 1994) is the main language of southern Zimbabwe and it is at the III stage of Berlin and Kay's sequence. Actually, it has four basic colour terms for *BLACK*, *WHITE*, *RED* and *GRUE*, but people start to separate *BLUE* from *GREEN* more and more often and children employ a new word for *YELLOW*, so it seems that Ndebele is likely to become a language of the IV or the V stage. The researchers, in this case, proposed three tasks to a group of children (34 for the first task and 30 for the second one) and a group of adult people (39). In the first exercise it was asked to children to attend a lesson about colours in Ndebele in which they had to say the name of the colour of some objects and then copy the right terms. The second exercise was about listing colour terms. Children had to write down as many words for colours as they knew, while adults had to do the same orally. In the final task both groups had to establish the boundaries between colours by mapping them.

Setswana (Davies *et al.* 1994b) is an official language in Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe and it is also spoken in Namibia. This language has the same basic colour terms of Ndebele but, unlike the latter, there is no separation between *BLUE* and *GREEN*. The subjects of this work were all children. Each child performed four tasks: colour-term listing, colour naming, animal term listing and body part term listing.

Xhosa (Davies *et al.* 1994c), a southern Bantu language spoken in South Africa and Zimbabwe, displays four basic color terms: *BLACK*, *WHITE*, *RED* and *YELLOW* and it also has a term for *GRUE* but the focus of this term is primarily in the green region. This is due to the fact that there is a new borrowed term to identify the blue region but it is not used enough to be accorded the basic status. The other

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<sup>3</sup> ISO-639-3 and Glottocode by Glottolog.org (<https://glottolog.org/glottolog/language>)

term that is going to become 'basic' is *BROWN*. This term first referred to the noun *dirt* but now people are starting to use it to label brown chips of Munsell colour chart. In this case there were 44 adult subjects who had to accomplish four tasks: order: lists, City University Colour Vision Test<sup>4</sup>, colour grouping and colour naming. In the list task, they were asked "Please, tell me as many colour terms as you know;" in the City University test they were shown one plate at a time and asked to point to the color most like the one in the middle; in the colour naming task they were shown 63 tiles, one at a time, and they were asked "What do you call this colour?" (1994: 182).

Finally, Chichewa (Davies *et al.* 1995), a language spoken in Malawi, presents five basic colour terms but it is important to highlight that three of them (*BLACK*, *RED* and *GRUE*) are composite categories that are in a process of decomposition. *BLACK* traditionally denotes all the shades of dark-grey, brown and blue-purples but the emergence of new terms denoting specifically grey and brown are leading *BLACK* to a decomposition. It is the same for *RED* that is used also for orange, pink and purple. With regards to *GRUE*, it has been pointed out that there are two terms for *BLUE*, employed especially among students<sup>5</sup> that are going to create a category of their own. As anticipated, two further terms are gaining the status of basic colour terms (*BROWN* and *GREY*). This is very interesting, since in Berlin and Kay's BCTT usually the term denoting *brown* should emerge only after *blue* and *green* had become basic. For this research 83 adult people were selected and they had to perform three tasks: lists, colour naming and the City University Colour Vision test.

Davies *et al.* (1995) made a comparison of the results on the Bantu languages they took into account. Even though these languages present all four basic colour terms and tend to have composite categories (e.g. *GRUE*), it would be useful to have similar subjects and the same tasks in order to compare the results and showcase differences and similarities in the Bantu area of studies.

With reference to other African languages, one must further mention "Anthropology of Colour" (MacLaury, Paramei and Don Dedrick 2007). The volume offers a broad spectrum of analytical approaches applied to a significant number of languages, including Egyptian Coptic, old Ethiopic and Arabic. All the contributors of this text classified the languages of their studies on the basis of BCTT, even if most of them did not consider universal categories in the same way Berlin and Kay did.

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<sup>4</sup> A quick and simple test of color vision, which requires no literacy and produces a preliminary indication of any colour vision anomalies. The test consists of ten plates, each consisting of a colour spot and four surrounding spots. The task is to point to the surrounding spot that is most like the center spot (Davies *et al.* 1994c: 181)

<sup>5</sup> Students offered many more combinations of terms and qualified colour terms; they offered non-basic traditional terms and, finally, they offered more borrowed terms (Davies *et al.* 1995: 267)

One of the contributors, Schenkel (2007), conducted a research about ancient Egyptian [egy; egyp1246] and Coptic [cop; copt1239] colour terms. He focused his attention on three issues: the general and particular usage of colour terms; their general meaning and the determination of their focus; and the etymology of colour terms in Afroasiatic languages. He began his paper by asserting that he depends on the content-related linguistics approach. As reported by Schenkel, “this approach perceives the world as linguistically divided. Colours are not natural, but determined by language, and this steers the behaviour of humanity with regard to reality” (Schenkel 2007: 212). According to Schenkel, there are four basic colour terms, all verbs (black, white, red and green) so Egyptian-Coptic is at the IIIa stage of Berlin and Kay’s evolutionary sequence; the focus of *RED* is in the red range, as well as the focus of *GREEN* is in the green range; the traditional written language presented more verbal colour terms but these were not preserved in Coptic so they did not enter the colloquial language.

A new research on Himba [sbw; simb1254] is found in “Colour studies: A broad spectrum” (Grandison *et al.* 2014). The authors, Alexandra Grandison, Ian R.L. Davies and Paul T. Sowden, discovered the emergence of a new colour term and suggested that these new findings have implications for future research on colour categories. They found that there is a new term referring to *GREEN*. This is very interesting, since a decade before, Davidoff *et al.* (2005) stated that Himba had only five colour terms, including *BUROU*, that was used to identify both *blue* and *green*. The new term, *girine*, is not used by all the informants; they therefore hypothesised that the emergence of this new term could be related to different factors: the recent increase in the availability of schooling within the Kaokoveld region of Namibia thanks to the efforts of NAMAS, the Norway’s Namibia Association, that is investing in mobile schools for Himba children since 2001 (Grandison *et al.* 2014: 64), with an inevitable contact with the Western culture and the English language; another explanation is that Himba has actually been less isolated than previous researchers thought, considering that the language present older borrowed terms. Even though *girine* does not meet all of the criteria of BCTT to be considered a basic colour term, it is important to map the evolution of this term and explore if and how this change in colour language affects the colour perception of its speakers (Grandison *et al.* 2014: 64).

Another study on Chakali [cli; chak1271] (Brindle 2016) attempted to reconstruct the way in which Chakali categorises colour terms and how colour basicness should be evaluated. Chakali is a language spoken in the Wa East District, in the Upper West Region of Ghana (Brindle 2017: 3). The author proposed four tasks to the participants and the results showed that Chakali can be considered a language of the II or the IV stage of Kay and Maffi’s (1999) typology, having a triad of basic colour terms for *black*, *white* and *red* and two more terms used to refer to *yellow* (*sosav*) and *grue* (*buluu*). Nevertheless, the focal task indicated that the foci of *sosav* and *buluu* is not as narrow as the terms of the triad.

Available evidences also showed that only the triad is used in folk taxonomies and that the consultants primarily used these three colours as standards, so the triad seems to be in a category of its own.

#### 4. Studies on Hausa and Swahili colour terms

In this section, the main works dealing with colour naming in Hausa and Swahili will be presented and briefly discussed. Despite the rich tradition of studies on the two languages, the amount of studies devoted to colour naming is fairly limited. The theoretical approaches of the studies that have appeared in the last few decades are rather heterogeneous, and include perspectives from lexical semantics, cognitive semantics and sociolinguistics.

Hausa [hau; haus1257] belongs to the West Chadic languages of the Chadic languages group, which is in turn part of the Afro-Asiatic language family. It is spoken mostly in northern Nigeria and southern Niger but it is used as *lingua franca* in many parts of western and central Africa.

One of the first attempts to study Hausa colour terminology and its symbolism dates back to Pauline M. Ryan's *Colour symbolism in Hausa literature* (Ryan 1962). She made a distinction between primary and secondary colour terms: *fari* (white), *baki* (black), *ja* (red) and *kore* (green) belong to the first group; while *kili* (grigio), *shudi* (blue), *rawaya* (yellow) and *shunayya* (purple) belong to the second one. The primary group consists of terms that are mono-lexemic, non-derivative and non-restrictive in usage, whereas the secondary group is made up of terms that are derivative and tend to be restrictive in their usage. Shades of hue and degrees of brightness within a colour category is expressed by means of analogy, e.g. *ja mai farin ruwa* (lit. 'red owner of white water') meaning 'pink;' reduplication, e.g. *kore-kore* (lit. greenish) that means 'light green' or the addition of ideophones, e.g. *fari fa'* (lit. 'very white') meaning 'snow white' (1962: 141-142).

Ryan decided to focus her attention on three of the basic colour terms, *fari*, *baki* and *ja*. According to her analysis, *fari* (white) has a positive connotation and is representative of socially desirable qualities; *baki* (black) represents negative and socially undesirable features; and *ja* (red) is ambiguous because usually it is associated with black but it does not have a negative connotation. It often reflects the idea of power, either personal or spiritual. This notion of power is due to a mythic allocation of spirits in a red town, Jangari.

She further provided a list of expressions with colour terms taken from Abraham (1962); a list of proverbs taken by Whitting (1940) and Abraham (1962); some poems from Hiskett's (1969) collection and three myths. In the first myth we can see how colour terms are used with respect to spirits; in the second one, there is an emphasis on colour red symbolism; and, in the last one, colour terms are combined or opposed to highlight changes in the story.



In conclusion she asserts that the triad of *fari*, *baki* and *ja* reflects human organism, its functions and the human condition. The fact that *ja* is often used it is a sign of the uncertainty of human existence. Moreover, she found peculiar to notice that the triad of colours seem to have a connection with the words *fari* meaning ‘beginning,’ *baki* that means ‘conclusion’ and *ja* ‘pull.’ They are written in the same way but have a different tonal scheme and vowel length. Similarly, in the mythology white represents the origin in time and space, black displays the ending and red represents everything that is between the origin and the end.

Ryan based her work on dictionaries available at that time, lists of expressions and proverbs, some poems and three myths, therefore it was a good starting point for a research about colour terminology and its symbolism, notwithstanding she had a limited corpus of samples. Furthermore the theory that the triad of basic colour terms is connected to the words meaning ‘beginning,’ ‘conclusion’ and ‘pull’ is just a mere supposition unsupported by additional data or subsequent studies.

Among the earliest studies we mention also Zarruk (1978), Bature (2004) and Dogondaji (2010). Zarruk explored the different colour terms used in Hausa, their association with specific objects and some categories. He provided a list of colour terms that did not conform to the criteria of Berlin and Kay. Similarly, Bature (2004) asserts that Hausa has at least twenty-five colour terms and just five of them can be considered ‘basic colour terms.’

In recent years, three articles by Rabi Abdulsalam Ibrahim (2014; 2016; 2019) have appeared, all of them focusing on the comparison between Hausa and other languages in the area of colour terminology, to identify the loanwords and to compare the way in which these languages make use of colour terms.

Batic (2006) compiled a list of expressions where colour terms are used in association with body parts with a metaphorical meaning, such as *jan-kashi*, lit. ‘endurance’ (lit. ‘red bone’).

Gian Claudio Batic and Sergio Baldi (2015) showed how ideophones<sup>6</sup> are used as modifiers of colour terms in Hausa language, for example in *fari sal* ‘(snow-white)’ where *sal* is used to emphasise whiteness. They also showed how colour terms are used to express experiences, features and attitudes. The basic colour terms ‘white’ and ‘black’ are employed to encode the emotional states of happiness and sadness (2015: 224) as we can see in expressions like *Shi mai bakin ciki ne* that means ‘he is sad’ (lit.

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<sup>6</sup> Ideophones in Hausa do not constitute a distinct part of speech, but some of them function to modify verbal actions or adjectives. Others modify nouns, and further constitute nouns. They are a large group of very specialised particles varying widely from each other and, very often, from all other words in the language (Batic and Baldi 2015: 214).



'he is the owner of a black belly'). The association of colours to body parts characterises the phraseological inventory of emotion and emotion-related events (Batic 2017: 494).

In 2014 Ibrahim wanted to reveal the influence of English on some indigenous languages of Nigeria, with particular emphasis on Hausa. With this study he noticed that some English terms have been incorporated and adapted to indigenous languages of Nigeria. For example, in Hausa we have the word *bulu* that refers to the blue region and it was adapted to Hausa language by adding a vowel between the consonants. In Hausa we also have other loanwords: *yalo* (yellow), *silba* (silver) and *gwaldin* (golden). Even the word for the category of colour is a borrowed term, many Hausa people prefer to use the word *kala* (eng. *colour*) instead of *launi*.

Besides, young Nigerian people tend to use English words even when there is an indigenous one to express something (Ibrahim 2014: 321), but it is important taking into account that English is one of the official languages of Nigeria.

On the contrary, even though Swahili [swh; swah1253] is well documented and has a long tradition of studies, we observe a paucity of data about colour terminology. Swahili is a *lingua franca* of eastern Africa and a Bantu language (Niger-Congo family). It is the official language of Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Uganda and it is widely spread also in Congo, Burundi, Malawi and Mozambique. The only available notions are provided by grammars (among others Bertoncini 2009; Mpiranya 2015) where, given the theoretical-practical purpose of the work, lists of colour terms are usually provided, but without specification on the symbolic value and the evolution of the single terms.

Just a few examples on the use of colours are relative to ideophones. Lusekelo (2013) claims that ideophones in Swahili have specific applications to the sensory world. They describe emotional experiences in degrees of intensity, e.g. *mweupe pe* (very white) and *mweupe pee* (excessive whiteness) (2013: 18).

Another example on the use of colour terms in Swahili is associated with body metaphors studied by Tramutoli (2020). In her article, Tramutoli discussed the relationship between body metaphors and Swahili traditions and beliefs. As for Hausa language, in Swahili 'white' is associated with positivity and 'black' is the negative counterpart. *Moyo mweupe* (lit. 'white heart') refers to various positive emotions; *roho nyeusi* (lit. 'black soul') is a bad and selfish person.

Both Lusekelo (2013) and Tramutoli (2020) just mentioned the role of colour terms in reference to some cognitive linguistic phenomena limiting themselves to consider BLACK, WHITE and RED.

Tatjana Chirichella (2021) supplied an analysis of colour terms in Swahili, highlighting the existence of three basic colour terms, *-eupe* (white), *-eusi* (black) and *-ekundu* (red), therefore positing Swahili as a II stage language. Nevertheless, the terms referring to green, yellow and blue are likely to

become basic, even if they do not meet all the criteria of BCTT. She based her studies on lists of colour terms provided by grammars and dictionaries and she conducted her research analyzing the occurrence of each term of the list in two *corpora*. One of the *corpus* was composed of literary texts, whilst the other one consisted of journalistic texts. She made use of the tools provided by computational linguistics and specifically of a platform called “Sketch Engine.” At the end of her analysis she was able to furnish statistics about the usage of each colour term and their semantic value. Nevertheless it was a limited research that had the specific purpose of outlining a new lists of colour terms that could include the words coined by new generations and also the purpose of clarifying the way in which colour terminology had changed over the years and the reason why it happened.

## 5. Conclusions

The issue of colour nomenclature has been addressed in a large variety of languages, including African languages. As we saw, until now almost every scholar who decided to commit to this investigation, limited himself or herself to defining the range of colour terms of a specific language. In this way they completely neglected a deeper analysis that could have given details about the symbolic meaning and the concept related to each colour in a given linguistic community. They also proposed almost the same tasks to their informants, that is, listing as many terms as they knew; matching these terms with a colour sample; and establishing boundaries among colour categories.

The scholarly literature on two languages with a rich tradition of studies like Hausa and Swahili has only considered a few fundamental aspects of colour nomenclature. The context of use, the symbolism and evolution of colours, as well as their precise collocation within a relevant theoretical frame of reference, represent some of the challenges to which linguistic research is called.

Studying colour terminology is a way to increase our knowledge in regard to the thinking system of a society. A clear overall picture on colour nomenclature in some african languages and, in this case, in Hausa and Swahili would be functional to a comparison with other languages. It would allow us to have a different point of view and a profound understanding of some subjects, such as metaphors using words related to the lexical field of the body. It could give us the tools to compare the standard variant to dialects, considering that Hausa and Swahili are both vehicular languages with a huge number of native speakers coming from different countries and with different socio-political backgrounds.

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