

COLOR TERMS AS EMOTIONAL MARKERS IN CHINESE AND ARMENIAN: A COMPARATIVE SEMANTIC AND CULTURAL STUDY

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Abstract. This study investigates color terms as emotional markers in Chinese and Armenian from a comparative semantic and cultural perspective. While color perception is grounded in universal physiological processes, the emotional and symbolic extensions of color terms are shaped by historically and culturally specific conceptualizations. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Berlin and Kay's theory of basic color terms, Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, and Wierzbicka's cultural semantics, the research examines the metaphorical and phraseological uses of selected core colors—red, white, black, green, and yellow—in both languages.

The analysis demonstrates that certain color–emotion mappings, such as redness associated with anger or shame, reflect embodied cognitive motivations shared across cultures. However, significant divergences emerge in symbolic and evaluative meanings. Red symbolizes happiness and prosperity in Chinese, but love, sacrifice, and religious significance in Armenian. White and black display a striking inversion: white is linked to mourning in Chinese but to purity in Armenian, whereas black functions as the principal color of mourning in Armenian culture.

The findings highlight the dynamic interplay between perceptual experience and sociocultural factors in the semantic evolution of color terms. By focusing on the understudied Chinese–Armenian language pair, the study contributes to contrastive linguistics, cognitive semantics, and intercultural communication, emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness in translation and cross-cultural interpretation.

Key words: color terms; emotional markers; cultural semantics; Chinese language; Armenian language; color symbolism; intercultural communication.

Introduction

In linguistics, the collection and study of colors, which is called colorative vocabulary, is carried out in connection with the everyday culture of that nation (Z. Pansat & N. Khalikova, 2023, p. 87). Color terms constitute one of the most fundamental lexical categories in any language. Beyond their primary function of denoting visual perception, color words frequently develop rich metaphorical and emotional meanings that reflect a community's cultural experience, historical memory, and value system. As a result, colors function not only as descriptive units but also as symbolic and emotional markers embedded in the linguistic worldview of a given culture. The study of color terminology has occupied a central place in linguistic research since the seminal work of Berlin and Kay (1969), who proposed that basic color terms follow universal patterns in their emergence across languages. While their theory highlights universal tendencies in color categorization, later research has demonstrated that the semantic extensions of color terms are deeply shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Within the framework of cognitive linguistics, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor is fundamental to human thought, and that abstract concepts — including emotions — are structured through metaphorical mappings grounded in cultural experience. Color terms frequently participate in such conceptual metaphors, linking sensory perception with emotional and evaluative meanings. From the perspective of cultural semantics, scholars such as Wierzbicka (1996) emphasize that meanings are embedded in cultural scripts and cannot be fully understood outside their sociocultural context. Similarly,

linguoculturological approaches (e.g., Maslova, 2001) underline the role of language in encoding national-cultural worldviews. On this matter, color terms serve as particularly productive material for exploring how emotional experience is linguistically conceptualized within different cultures. Chinese and Armenian, representing distinct linguistic families and cultural traditions, offer a productive field for comparative analysis.

The present study **aims to** conduct a comparative semantic and cultural analysis of color terms as emotional markers in Chinese and Armenian. The research focuses on the metaphorical extensions and phraseological uses of selected basic color terms and examines similarities and divergences in their emotional conceptualization. By integrating cognitive linguistic theory with cultural-semantic analysis, this study seeks to contribute to contrastive linguistics and intercultural communication research. The **novelty** of the study lies in its focus on the Chinese–Armenian language pair, which has received little attention in the field of color semantics. The analysis is based on a qualitative examination of **lexical units, idiomatic expressions, and commonly attested phraseological constructions** drawn from authoritative dictionaries, linguistic descriptions, and widely recognized usage in both languages. Through a systematic comparative analysis of these materials, the research aims to reveal how emotional meanings are structured and culturally encoded in the two linguistic systems, and how these differences reflect broader cultural models of emotion.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The primary **objective** of this study is to investigate the semantic and cultural functions of color terms as emotional markers in Chinese and Armenian. More specifically, the research aims to:

1. Identify the basic color terms in Chinese and Armenian that exhibit emotional and metaphorical extensions.
2. Analyze the semantic mechanisms through which color terms acquire emotional meanings.
3. Compare the emotional associations of selected color terms in the two languages.
4. Determine the extent to which these associations reflect universal cognitive patterns or culture-specific conceptualizations.
5. Reveal the role of historical and cultural factors in shaping color symbolism.

The research adopts a **comparative semantic and cultural-analytical approach**. The study is based on:

- lexical analysis of basic color terms in both languages,
- examination of phraseological units and idiomatic expressions containing color terms,
- contextual analysis of metaphorical usages,
- cultural-semantic interpretation grounded in cognitive linguistics.

The theoretical framework draws upon Berlin and Kay's theory of basic color terms, Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, and Wierzbicka's cultural semantic approach. The analysis focuses primarily on selected core color terms (such as red, white, black, and green) that demonstrate significant emotional extensions in both languages. By combining contrastive linguistic analysis with cultural interpretation, the study aims to provide a systematic account of how color terms function as carriers of emotional meaning in Chinese and Armenian.

Results and discussion

Theoretical Background on Color and Emotion

Color is not only a characteristic feature of nearly all objects in the objective world, but also a source of aesthetic and emotional impressions (Rubinstein, 2002, p. 201). Color terms and semantic categorization of color terminology has long been a central topic in linguistic and anthropological research. The foundational study by Berlin and Kay (1969) demonstrated that languages tend to develop basic color terms according to universal evolutionary patterns. Their theory suggests that although languages differ in the number of basic color terms they possess, the categorization of perceptual color space follows certain cognitive regularities. However, subsequent research has shown that while perceptual categorization may exhibit universal tendencies, the semantic extensions of color terms vary considerably across cultures. Basic color terms often expand beyond their literal reference to visual perception and enter the domains of evaluation, morality, social hierarchy and emotion. Thus, color vocabulary represents an intersection between biological perception and cultural interpretation. On this point, color terms can be viewed as semantic nodes that connect sensory experience with abstract

conceptual domains. Their metaphorical productivity makes them particularly suitable for examining the interaction between cognition and culture.

Conceptual Metaphor and Emotional Meaning

Within the framework of cognitive linguistics, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of human thought. Abstract concepts, including emotions, are structured through systematic metaphorical mappings grounded in embodied experience. Emotions are frequently conceptualized through sensory domains, including temperature, spatial orientation, weight, and color. For example, anger may be associated with redness, sadness with darkness, or jealousy with greenness in various linguistic traditions. These mappings are not arbitrary; they are motivated by embodied experiences (e.g., facial flushing during anger) and reinforced by cultural conventions. Importantly, while certain color-emotion associations may emerge from shared physiological experiences, their stabilization and symbolic prominence are culturally mediated. Therefore, the same color may evoke divergent emotional meanings across linguistic communities.

Cultural Semantics and Linguistic Worldview

From the perspective of cultural semantics (Wierzbicka, 1996), lexical meanings are embedded within culturally specific “scripts” that reflect shared values, beliefs, and historical experiences. Language does not merely label reality; it encodes culturally structured interpretations of reality. Linguoculturology (Maslova, 2001) further emphasizes that language functions as a repository of national-cultural consciousness. Symbolic meanings attached to color terms are shaped by mythology, religion, ritual practices, and collective memory. For example, associations of white with mourning in Chinese culture are rooted in traditional cosmology and funeral rites, whereas in many European traditions white is linked to purity and spiritual innocence. Thus, color terms operate as culturally marked signs that reveal how emotional experience is conceptualized within a particular linguistic worldview.

Universality and Cultural Specificity in Color–Emotion Mapping

The relationship between universality and cultural specificity remains central to the study of color semantics. On the one hand, perceptual processing of color is biologically grounded and relatively stable across human populations. On the other hand, emotional symbolism demonstrates considerable cross-cultural variation. This dual nature suggests that color-emotion mappings arise from an interaction between embodied cognition and sociocultural construction. While physiological reactions may motivate certain associations, cultural narratives, historical events, and symbolic systems determine which meanings become dominant and conventionalized within a language. A comparative analysis of Chinese and Armenian color terms therefore provides an opportunity to explore how universal perceptual foundations interact with distinct cultural histories to produce divergent emotional symbolism.

Red as an Emotional Marker in Chinese and Armenian

Among basic color terms, red occupies a particularly prominent position in both Chinese and Armenian linguistic and cultural systems. While its perceptual basis is universal, its emotional and symbolic extensions reveal both shared embodied motivations and significant cultural divergences.

Red and Physiological Emotion: Anger and Shame. In both languages, redness is closely associated with heightened emotional arousal, particularly anger and embarrassment. In Chinese, expressions such as 气红了脸 (to become red in the face from anger) and 脸红脖子粗 (face red and neck thick) reflect a direct mapping between physiological change and emotional intensity. Similarly, the phrase 脸红 (to blush, to redden) denotes blushing and is commonly associated with embarrassment or modesty. Armenian demonstrates parallel constructions, such as կարմրել գայրույթից (to turn red from anger) and կարմրել սანոթից (to turn red from shame). In both linguistic systems, redness functions as an index of increased blood circulation caused by emotional excitation. This correspondence supports the cognitive linguistic assumption that certain metaphorical mappings, such as “anger is redness”, are grounded in embodied human experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Thus, at the level of physiological metaphor, Chinese and Armenian display a high degree of convergence. The emotional conceptualization of anger and shame through redness appears to reflect universal bodily processes rather than culture-specific symbolism.

Red and Jealousy: Divergent Emotional Coding. While physiological emotions demonstrate similarity, divergence becomes evident in the conceptualization of jealousy. In Chinese, jealousy is

frequently expressed through redness, as in 眼红 (“red eyes,” meaning to be envious) and 红眼病 (“red-eye disease,” metaphorically referring to jealousy). Here, redness extends beyond physical reaction and becomes a conventionalized emotional marker. In Armenian, however, jealousy is not associated with red but more commonly linked to green in colloquial usage (e.g., expressions equivalent to “the eyes turned green”). This contrast illustrates that although emotional arousal may share biological foundations, its symbolic encoding is shaped by culturally specific metaphorical traditions. The Chinese association between redness and envy may reflect culturally embedded symbolic systems in which red signifies intensity and emotional excess. Armenian symbolism, influenced by broader Indo-European metaphorical patterns, aligns jealousy with greenness rather than redness. This divergence demonstrates that color-emotion mappings are not universally fixed but culturally structured.

Red and Positive Emotional Valuation. A more profound contrast emerges in the domain of positive emotional symbolism. In Chinese culture, red (红) is strongly associated with happiness, prosperity, celebration, and social success. Expressions such as 红火 (prosperous, thriving), 开门红 (a successful beginning), 走红 (to become popular), and 红人 (a favored or popular person) illustrate the positive evaluative load of red in social and communal contexts. These associations are deeply rooted in traditional cosmology, ritual practices, and festival culture, where red symbolizes good fortune and vitality. Consequently, in Chinese linguistic consciousness, red often encodes collective joy and auspiciousness. In Armenian, red (կարմիր) carries complex cultural and historical meanings. It is frequently linked to blood, sacrifice, and national memory, reflecting both historical trauma and patriotic sentiment. Moreover, red has strong religious significance: in Christian tradition, it symbolizes Christ’s blood. This symbolism is especially evident during Easter, when red-dyed eggs represent the blood of Christ and the promise of resurrection. Red is also employed metaphorically in love and passion (e.g., the red rose), reinforcing its association with intensity and deep emotional resonance. Thus, whereas Chinese red often signals celebration and communal harmony, Armenian red conveys intensity, sacrifice, religious meaning, and historical consciousness.

The comparative analysis of red in Chinese and Armenian reveals a dual structure. At the physiological level, emotional redness associated with anger and shame demonstrates strong cross-cultural similarity, suggesting embodied cognitive motivation. At the symbolic level, however, the emotional valence of red diverges significantly. In Chinese, red is predominantly future-oriented and auspicious, symbolizing prosperity and social flourishing. In Armenian, red is frequently retrospective, commemorative, and religiously significant, linked to historical memory, Christ’s blood, and cultural rituals such as Easter. These differences illustrate how a universally perceived color can acquire distinct emotional profiles within different linguistic worldviews. Therefore, red functions simultaneously as a biologically motivated emotional index and as a culturally constructed symbolic sign. Its semantic development results from the interaction of experiential and socio-historical factors shaping emotional meaning.

White and Black as Emotional Markers in Chinese and Armenian

White and black are among the most culturally and emotionally charged colors in both Chinese and Armenian linguistic systems. Unlike red, whose symbolism may vary between joy, passion, or intensity, white and black demonstrate particularly striking contrasts in emotional and ritual significance across the two cultures. Their emotional meanings are closely intertwined with social norms, ritual practices, and historical traditions.

White: Purity and Mourning. In Chinese culture, white (白) is strongly associated with death and mourning. Expressions such as 白事 (funeral matters) and ritual practices involving white clothing and decorations signify bereavement, loss, and spiritual transition. White, in this context, is emotionally linked to grief, solemnity, and the impermanence of life. The association between white and mourning is reinforced through centuries of traditional funeral rites, Confucian ritual prescriptions, and cosmological symbolism, where white denotes emptiness and transition rather than vitality. In Armenian culture, however, white (սպիտակ) is predominantly associated with purity, innocence, and spiritual elevation. Its emotional connotations are positive and life-affirming, reflected in traditional practices such as bridal attire and religious ceremonies. For example, the white wedding dress symbolizes chastity, hope, and the beginning of a new life, while white also frequently appears in religious iconography and sacred texts as a marker of moral and spiritual virtue. Unlike Chinese, white in Armenian culture is

rarely linked to death or mourning, demonstrating a striking cultural divergence in emotional conceptualization.

Black: Mourning and Authority. Black (黑 / 黑) serves as another salient marker of emotional and symbolic meaning, but its cultural associations are similarly inverted between the two linguistic systems.

In Chinese, black (黑) generally conveys negative moral and evaluative connotations, such as secrecy, illegality, evil, or hidden power. This is reflected in numerous lexicalized expressions. For example, 黑社会 (black society) denotes organized crime; 黑心 (black heart) refers to cruelty or moral corruption; 黑名单 (blacklist) indicates exclusion or punishment; and 黑市 (black market) implies illegality. The adjective 黑 may also intensify negativity, as in 黑暗 (dark, oppressive) or 抹黑 (to smear; to defame). At the same time, black may carry positive or authoritative symbolism in specific ritualized domains. In traditional Chinese opera, particularly in Peking Opera, a black-painted face often represents integrity, firmness, and impartiality, as seen in the character of Bao Zheng. Thus, black can signal moral authority and seriousness within culturally codified theatrical symbolism. Importantly, black is not the primary color of mourning in Chinese tradition.

In Armenian culture, by contrast, black (սև) is the principal color of mourning and grief. Linguistic evidence strongly reflects this association. Expressions such as սև օր (black day) denote misfortune or tragedy; սև բախտ (black fate) refers to ill destiny; սև հագնել (to wear black) implies mourning; and սև լուր (black news) signifies news of death. In ritual practice, mourners traditionally wear black clothing, reinforcing the color's association with loss and solemnity. Black functions both metaphorically and ritually as a marker of bereavement and existential sorrow. Unlike in Chinese, where black primarily indexes illegality or moral negativity, in Armenian black is deeply embedded in the cultural script of death and collective mourning.

The contrast between white and black in Chinese and Armenian illustrates a compelling example of cultural specificity in color-emotion mapping: **White:** mourning, funerals, grief, purity, innocence, hope, weddings. **Black:** authority, seriousness, secrecy, misfortune mourning, grief, funerals, loss. This highlights that while both languages use perceptually and symbolically salient colors to encode emotion, the specific emotional valence and ritual function of each color differ sharply. White and black are emotionally “swapped” between Chinese and Armenian, demonstrating how historical, religious, and social practices shape emotional conceptualization. These contrasts support the notion that while perceptual recognition of color is universal, its emotional and symbolic significance is culturally constructed. In cognitive-linguistic terms, the embodiment of emotion through color is mediated by cultural schemas, ritual practices, and social conventions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Wierzbicka, 1996; Maslova, 2001). Chinese and Armenian exemplify how the same visual stimuli—white and black—can be mapped onto divergent emotional domains: one culture associates white with grief and black with moral or ritual authority, whereas the other associates black with mourning and white with purity and celebration. Furthermore, these differences have practical implications for translation, literature, and intercultural communication. Translators must account for the inversion of color symbolism to preserve emotional meaning when rendering texts between the two languages.

Green and Yellow as Emotional Markers in Chinese and Armenian

Green (绿 / կապույտ) is a highly versatile color in both Chinese and Armenian cultural and linguistic systems, but its emotional and symbolic associations differ markedly between the two languages. In Chinese, green often signifies vitality, youth, freshness, and growth, reflecting its connection to nature and the wood element in traditional cosmology. However, it can also carry strong negative connotations in certain social contexts. The idiom 戴绿帽子 (wear a green hat) metaphorically denotes male infidelity and social shame, while 青出于蓝而胜于蓝 (green comes from blue but surpasses it) conveys progress and development. These examples demonstrate the dual nature of green as both a positive marker of growth and a negative marker of personal dishonor or social embarrassment.

In Armenian, green primarily symbolizes nature, hope, freshness, and renewal, often appearing in literary and everyday expressions. For example, կապույտ է դաշտը (the field is green) evokes vitality and abundance, while կապույտ աչքեր (green eyes) metaphorically expresses envy, mirroring European

symbolic patterns. Unlike Chinese, green in Armenian rarely carries a culturally prescribed social or moral stigma, illustrating that its negative connotation in Chinese is a product of specific cultural narratives. This contrast highlights how the same perceptual color can acquire divergent emotional and social significance, shaped by culturally specific metaphorical extensions.

Yellow (黄 / դեղին) is another color with rich symbolic and emotional associations, particularly in Chinese culture. Historically, yellow was reserved for the emperor and symbolized power, authority, and centrality, as reflected in the idiom 黄道吉日 (“auspicious day,” literally “yellow path”) and other ritualistic expressions. It can also carry metaphorical or evaluative meanings; for example, 黄粱一梦 (“yellow millet dream”) represents transience and the fleeting nature of worldly success. In modern colloquial Chinese, yellow may acquire erotic or cautionary connotations, as seen in 黄色书籍 (“yellow books” → pornography). These multiple layers demonstrate yellow’s complex emotional and social semiotics. In Armenian culture, yellow’s emotional significance is less pronounced, and it is more often used in literal or descriptive contexts, though modern idioms do exist. For example, դեղին քարտ (yellow card) signals a warning, primarily in sports contexts, while expressions relating to autumnal foliage or illness employ yellow metaphorically for caution or decay. Unlike Chinese, Armenian yellow lacks a historical-political or spiritual dimension, and its emotional symbolism is limited in traditional literature. This contrast underscores the role of historical and cultural experience in shaping the emotional weight and idiomatic productivity of color terms.

Conclusion

This study has examined the emotional and cultural significance of selected color terms—red, white, black, green, and yellow—in Chinese and Armenian, revealing both shared embodied metaphors and striking culture-specific divergences. The analysis demonstrates that while the physiological basis of color perception provides a common ground for certain emotions—such as redness associated with anger or shame—the emotional and symbolic extensions of colors are profoundly shaped by historical, religious, and social contexts. Red, for instance, functions in both languages as a marker of intense emotion, yet its evaluative and cultural connotations diverge: in Chinese, red predominantly signifies happiness, prosperity, and social celebration, whereas in Armenian, red evokes love, passion, sacrifice, and religious meaning. White and black exhibit a complementary inversion of emotional meaning: white is associated with mourning in Chinese culture but with purity, innocence, and life-affirming rituals in Armenian; conversely, black serves as a marker of moral seriousness and negativity in Chinese, but is the principal color of mourning and grief in Armenian culture. Green illustrates the cultural specificity of social metaphors, functioning positively as vitality and growth in both languages but acquiring negative connotations of infidelity in Chinese. Yellow demonstrates the layered historical and evaluative symbolism in Chinese, while Armenian usage remains more literal and limited in emotional scope. The findings of this comparative study underscore the interplay between universal cognitive mechanisms and culturally mediated conceptualization in the semantic development of color terms. Colors serve simultaneously as embodied emotional indices and culturally constructed symbols, reflecting collective memory, ritual practice, and social norms. The analysis also highlights the implications for translation, intercultural communication, and literary interpretation, as emotional connotations embedded in color terms cannot be assumed to transfer directly across cultures. By focusing on Chinese and Armenian—a pair of linguistically and culturally distinct languages rarely examined together in color semantics—this study contributes to cross-cultural linguistics, cognitive semantics, and translation studies. It demonstrates that understanding the cultural specificity of color-emotion mappings is essential for accurate interpretation, effective translation, and the appreciation of the emotional texture in literary and everyday discourse.

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