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Color Terms in Past Cultures

International Workshop at the Center for Advanced Studies, LMU Munich

8 and 9 September 2016

Thursday, 8 September 2016

11:00–11:30 **Denise Reitzenstein** (LMU Munich/CAS)
Welcome Address and Introduction

Chair: Henry Heitmann-Gordon (LMU Munich)

11:30–12:30 **Carole Biggam** (University of Glasgow)
Some Problems in Historical Colour Semantics as Illustrated by English

12:30–13:30 Lunch

13:30–14:30 **Victoria Bogushevskaya** (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore Milan)
The Old Chinese 'Grue' Composite Colour Category

14:30–15:30 **David A. Warburton** (Excellence Cluster Topoi Berlin)
Material Colours in the Neolithic and Bronze Age and their Relationship to
Abstract Colour Concepts

15:30–16:00 Coffee Break

Chair: Thoralf Schröder (LMU Munich)

16:00–17:00 **Katerina Ierodiakonou** (National Kapodistrian University of
Athens/University of Geneva)
Is 'Bright' a Colour?

17:00–18:00 **Hariclia Brecolaki** (National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens)
Colour Terms to Describe Bodily Signs and Human Idiosyncrasies in
Aristotle's Physiognomics

18:30 Conference Dinner (Café Reitschule)

Friday, 9 September 2016

Chair: Birgit Christiansen (LMU Munich)

10:00–11:00 **Lydia Pelletier-Michaud** (Université Laval, Québec/Berlin)
Marmoreus, “as White as Marble”? On Latin Adjectives, Greek Meanings and the Ovidian Art of Cultivating Ambiguity

11:00–12:00 **Denise Reitzenstein** (LMU Munich)
Aulus Gellius again: Colour in the Context of his Attic Nights

12:00–14:00 Lunch

Chair: Felix Henke (LMU Munich)

14:00–15:00 **Teresa Bernheimer** (SOAS University of London)
Blues, Whites, and Yellows: Colour and Politics in Early Islam

15:00–16:00 **Barbara Schäfer-Prieß** (LMU Munich)
Two Basic Colour Terms for ‘Red’ in Old French? The Relationship between Roge and Vermeil from a Diachronic Perspective and in Comparison with other Romance Languages

16:00–16:30 Coffee Break

16:30–17:30 **Mike Huxtable** (Durham University)
Grosseteste and the Green Knight: Colouring Chivalry in Late Medieval Heraldic Writing and the Romance

17:30–18:00 Final Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Venue:

Center for Advanced Studies
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
Seestraße 13
80802 München

Abstracts Workshop “Color Terms in Past Cultures”

Carole Biggam (University of Glasgow)

Some Problems in Historical Colour Semantics as Illustrated by English

This paper will aim to address certain problems of interpretation faced by the modern researcher when investigating historical colour systems, and the emphasis will be on the English language. The first problem to be discussed is the scarcity and unrepresentative nature of the records which survive for most historical languages, and the difficulty of distinguishing between the meanings of colour terms as used by ordinary native speakers and by the educated minority. A second problem to be addressed is the difficulty of detecting the connotative senses of colour terms and the presence of non-colour elements embedded in colour words or phrases. Understanding connotations often requires considerable cultural knowledge of an ancient society, the evidence for which may not be available, but retrieving non-colour elements can be even more problematic, as such possibilities often simply do not occur to the modern researcher. Here the work of anthropological semanticists is crucial.

The researcher must also be wary of other potential features of colour systems which may be encountered. One is the presence of macro-colour terms, which denote categories considered by many modern western speakers to be too extensive. Another is context-restricted terms which, as illustrated by an Old English term for BLUE, can sometimes be identified with a minimum of evidence. Finally, the role of flowers and fruit as colour term prototypes is considered, followed by suggestions as to how a change of prototype appears to be a feature of the process by which some colour terms can morph from concrete to abstract.

Victoria Bogushevskaya (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore Milan)

The Old Chinese ‘Grue’ Composite Colour Category

A colour term may be simple, representing a single hue or a single fundamental category (e.g. English red for RED), or composite, also known as macro or extended, representing the union of two or more fundamental categories. Qīng 青 is a basic colour term for the composite GRUE (GREEN + BLUE) category and one of the canonical colours in Ancient China; it functions as a semantic determiner in derived phonosemantic (Chin. xíngshēng 形声) and syssemantic-category (Chin. huìyì 會意) characters. In many contexts qīng is exchangeable with phonologically very close synonymous cāng 蒼, and is occasionally interchangeable with the context-restricted lexemes bì 碧 and piǎo 縹.

One of the characteristics of the Old Chinese GRUE category represented by the basic term qīng is that it denotes not only cool primaries, but also extends into the macro-black area. The Chinese sources either avoid the etymological problem of the ‘black’/ ‘dark’ meaning of this lexeme, or suggest the only and quite an unpersuasive explanation: some kind of despotism of Qín’s 秦 (221–207 BCE) chancellor Zhào Gāo 趙高.

The presentation aims to provide semantic analysis of all the existing meanings of Old Chinese GRUE colour category represented by the basic term qīng and its synonyms, determines the sequence of its meanings’ emergence, and brings forward a hypothesis about the reasons for this syncretism.

David A. Warburton (Excellence Cluster Topoi Berlin)

Material Colours in the Neolithic and Bronze Age and their Relationship to Abstract Colour Concepts

My argument remains that the sources of most of the colours known from the Bronze Age were not derived from ordinary things of the world around us, but rather that the later

abstract categories crystallized out of special high value object categories: jade, lapis lazuli, carnelian, turquoise, amethyst, gold, silver, etc. Using metal, glass, faience, etc., technicians attempted to improve on these colours, either making them stronger or cheaper. The technicians also exploited natural pigments (but usually mineral, rather than organismic) to imitate these colours. This increased the importance of colour as a conscious social category. Originally, these materials were related to the actual objects in the minds of the ancients, and the words did not bear a conceptual, abstract meaning separate from the object. However, the abstract colour words which began to emerge came from the names of these objects – and then the concept of abstract colours was formed. The paper will concentrate on the concrete materials related to colour, and the history of the development.

Katerina Ierodiakonou (National Kapodistrian University of Athens/University of Geneva)
Is 'Bright' a Colour?

Plato's account of basic colours as well as his examples of the production of mixed colours suggest that the bright (lampron) and shiny (stilbon) is a basic colour together with the white, the black and the red. A similar idea is also conveyed from the little we know about Democritus' views on colours, at least if we are to trust Theophrastus' testimony; for Democritus seems to have conceived of the bright (lampron) as a special kind of the colour white, though in his case the other basic colours, apart from white, are black, red and greenish-yellow. The inclusion of the bright among colours immediately captures our attention and causes great puzzlement, since brightness for us denotes a certain quality of colours and not another hue. But does this mean that ancient philosophers did not distinguish colour terms from the other visual qualities of objects such as brightness? This is the issue I want to address in my presentation, and the sources that I draw my evidence from are principally Plato's dialogue the *Timaeus* and Theophrastus' treatise *On the senses*.

Hariclia Brecoulaki (National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens)
Colour Terms to Describe Bodily Signs and Human Idiosyncrasies in Aristotle's *Physiognomics*

In Aristotle's *Physiognomics* the author debates the possibility that there is some connexion between bodily signs and mental characteristics based on keen observation and an empirical method of interpretation. In his descriptions, colour terms are often used to suggest physical qualities and corresponding mental peculiarities: "The charitable are delicate-looking, pale-complexioned and bright-eyed; the body of man of easy disposition is pink and white and has a clear complexion; those with tawny-coloured hair are brave; the reddish are of bad character etc.". In this paper will be discussed the colour terms used in the Aristotelian treatise with regard to the colours used in Greek painting of the late fourth and third centuries BC for the rendering of the human complexion and the colour of the eyes.

Lydia Pelletier-Michaud (Université Laval, Québec/Berlin)
Marmoreus, "as White as Marble"? On Latin Adjectives, Greek Meanings and the Ovidian Art of Cultivating Ambiguity

It was the difficulty to translate poetic terms – especially in the Homeric epics – that first drew the attention of philologists and historians to the question of colour-naming in ancient languages. But for decades, philologists have been studying texts looking for expressions of a very specific phenomenon, the so-called "basic colour terms" – a biased conception of colours that lead not only to force ancient vocabulary into modern categories, but also to deny the specific codes and inner workings of poetic language. In recent years, researchers have successfully put forward multidisciplinary approaches to enable a more global

understanding of the colour-phenomena in ancient cultures; yet “ancient colours” remain scarcely explored as a poetic and literary phenomenon. Just as the anthropological study of colour undeniably enriches our understanding of ancient texts, it is nonetheless necessary, in order to understand their meaning fully and allow their study as valid historical material, to put colour-terms back in their literary context. In Augustan poetry, the literary context includes the Greek canon which often played the role of a primary reference in the use of colour terms.

In this paper, I will focus on a group of Latin adjectives referring to noble materials traditionally understood as expressing “brightness” or “whiteness” – *marmoreus*, *eburneus*, *argenteus* –, and their poetic use in similes enhancing the qualities of eroticized bodies. Partially due to the fact that most of these terms easily translate into modern languages, they did not always receive the full attention they deserved. But are marble, ivory and silver truly and solely “white”? Why are we so sure that the chromatic – or achromatic – appearance of these materials is the main quality that Roman poets meant to put forward by means of these adjectives? As we will see, these terms can connote diverse sensations – for example, smoothness or coldness. Furthermore, poetic and material referents do not always concord, leading to ambiguities that have been used profitably by authors as a powerful device for their poetic inventiveness.

Denise Reitzenstein (LMU Munich)

Aulus Gellius again: Colour in the Context of his Attic Nights

Gell. 2,26 is an ancient conversation on colour terms well known among those studying colour terms in Antiquity and beyond. The dialogue occurs between Marcus Cornelius Fronto, a famous Roman grammarian and rhetorician of the 2nd century AD, and Favorinus, a Roman philosopher and philhellene, being both a friend and teacher of Gellius. They start tackling the question if Greek or Latin has got more colour terms to describe shades of ,red‘ (*simplex color rufus*) and ,green‘ (*simplex color viridis*) and end up discussing the use and meaning of colour terms in ancient poetry. Though this conversation had a lot of attention, there was but little discussion on the use of colour terms in the whole work of the Attic Nights and about the context of the dialogue within the Attic Nights. Except from this, Gellius’ method in other texts and issues not related to colour terminology help to understand Gell. 2,26. The call on Fronto suffering from a disease on his feet is an important starting point to the following discussion on colours.

Teresa Bernheimer (SOAS University of London)

Blues, Whites, and Yellows: Colour and Politics in Early Islam

The period between the 7th to 10th centuries, the beginning and end of what is commonly referred to as ‘the formative period of Islam’, appears to have witnessed a great development in colour terminologies in Arabic: there are very few colour terms at the beginning of the period (five basic terms, corresponding to Berlin and Kay’s stage IV), and very many at the end of the period, with an even greater number of possible meanings (a stage VII system according to the Berlin and Kay classification).

Thus far, we know little about this great development: not only are colours a clearly under-researched field in the study of early Islam and Arabic, but there is also the problem of the source material. Arabic, a semitic language, is little known before the Islamic period; there is some Nabataean and Şafaitic rock graffiti and a small (and still increasing) corpus of inscriptions in Arabic script, but our main understanding of the origins and early development of Arabic comes from much later sources; it seems to be intimately connected to the origins and development of Islam. The earliest extant literary sources in Arabic are dated to the 9th and 10th centuries; in other words, there are about three centuries between the earliest period of Islam and the extant material, about which we primarily know from the later works; works that reflect a highly sophisticated world that could

hardly have been more different than the world of the events they purport to describe. This problem of the source material is perhaps the most contested question in the study of any topic relating to the early Islamic period, and I will not say more about here. Rather, I will do what in recent years has been offered as one possible way around the problem—that is, include a look at documents and other material evidence that are our only truly contemporaneous evidence for the crucial period between ca 600 and 1000.

In this talk I will thus briefly look at color terms at the beginning and end of the formative period of Islam, so around 600 and around 1000. I will then look at some material evidence for the crucial period in between (two papyri and two rock inscriptions) to give a sense of how colour terms were used, and suggest that the 'great development' in Arabic colour terminology between 600 and 1000 may not have been as great as it first appears.

Barbara Schäfer-Prieß (LMU Munich)

Two Basic Colour Terms for 'Red' in Old French? The Relationship between *roge* and *vermeil* from a Diachronic Perspective and in Comparison with other Romance Languages

Unlike contemporary French with *rouge* as an uncontested basic term for the category 'red' and *vermeil* as a clear hyponym, the relationship between *roge* and *vermeil* in Old French - as far as it can be reconstructed by text analysis - is such that both *roge* and *vermeil* meet the criteria for basic colour terms, with *vermeil*, at least in certain text types, even showing higher frequencies. There are no indications of a hyponymic relationship or to a confinement to different hues.

In my contribution I would like to define in greater detail the relationship between the two terms in Old French and to follow its development to Modern French, considering as well the situation in other Romance languages.

Mike Huxtable (Durham University)

Grosseteste and the Green Knight: Colouring Chivalry in Late Medieval Heraldic Writing and the Romance

Despite differing in terms of genre, language of composition and intended audience, the two 'colourful' fourteenth-century texts I will be discussing - Johannes de Bado Aureo's **Tractatus de Armis** and the alliterative romance **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** - have a particular, phenomenologically fascinating factor in common: both find 'greenness' and chivalry to be an ambiguous, even problematic combination. I will discuss how this perception and its argumentation occurred by examining the emergence of a species of heraldic writing in the later medieval period that drew on natural philosophy for its inspiration and authority; Robert Grosseteste's thirteenth-century **De colore** in particular may be seen to have found its way into this discourse and to have informed the hierarchical debate of colour meanings in armorial writing. One implication for the cross-fertilization of ideas, sources and literary contexts involved in this chromatic melting pot concerns the role of green and other armorial colours used symbolically in romance writing. If the **Gawain**-poet had known, directly or indirectly, of the heraldic theory of colours outlined in De Bado's text, then fascinating possibilities emerge for our interpretation of his most famous poem, and the culture, society and beliefs to which it was addressed.