

# *A Comparative Analysis of Basic Colour Words in English and Russian from the Intercultural Perspective*

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**Abstract:** Language as we know is a tool, which we use in our daily life without even thinking how important and multifaceted it is. The same words and phrases can be perceived in different ways. This is a matter of culture. Language is the reflection of culture and vice versa. They depend on each other. At the first glance, the same words may have different cultural connotations. The goal of the thesis is to learn the differences and similarities between connotations of basic color terms in English and Russian from a multicultural perspective and analyze their causes from natural, geographical, historical, political and social factors. The method of research in this thesis is comparative analysis, which will allow us to know more about the subject of color terms of two different cultures and also, will give us a chance to compare and contrast the connotations of basic color words. The expected result of this study is finding the most effective way to intercultural communication by learning the differences and similarities in connotations of two languages and effectively applying this knowledge to language teaching.

## 1. Introduction

Color words are a very important part of the vocabulary in almost all the languages. Color words are not just a simple description tool as we used to think. It is hard to underestimate meanings of the colors, but still not so many people think about the connotative meanings that lie behind them. English speaking countries and Russia have very long history and different cultures. Therefore, the same colors in English and Russia could have different implied meanings, which can be affected by natural, geographical, historical, political and social factors. Today in the age of globalization, this topic “A comparative analysis of basic color words in English and Russian” is extremely important for people who are experiencing or dealing with different cultures. Knowing the basic concepts of colors and their meanings in different cultures will help us as speakers or translators to communicate effectively with representatives of different cultures and avoid the awkward moments during the communication. [1]

Russian language and English language both have a long history; hence they frequently become the objects of comparative study. Comparative method of study will be used in this research to find out the differences and similarities of color perception between English and Russian.

Having dealt with meanings of the basic color terms in his final work, the author will have a

chance to discover how much influence colors have on the language and find out more about features of perception and meanings of English and Russian color terms.

The purpose of this comparison is to find the similarities and differences of the cultural connotations of the basic color words between English and Russian, analyze the reasons from natural, geographical, historical, political and social aspects, and try to elaborate on the relationship between language (color words) and culture and further shed light on intercultural communication and foreign language teaching.

## **2. Comparison and Contrast of Color Words between English and Russian**

### **2.1 Black and Черный**

In English culture, black color represents the power and authority as well as dignity. We can trace the tendency of British judges and lawyers to wear black in court. The British gentlemen used to wear black bowler hat to show their status. The hats of royal guards, the black dress and hat of yeoman warders at the London Tower and the black coat and the high boots of the royal riders all represents the majesty and dignity of the British royal family. This is the reason why western people prefer to wear black dress on some special occasions or at official meetings. This is also true for Russia. In Russia and all post-soviet countries, black color has the meaning of official and “classy” color. This color also has another meaning both in Russian and English. Black color also has a negative meaning. For example, such words like “black market” or “Черный рынок” means “a market place where you can buy and sell illegal products”, or the word “blacklist” which also has equivalent in Russian, which is “Черный список”. “Blacklist” means “a list of the people who are to be punished”. “Blackmail” refers to an action of obtaining money from people by forcing them to do something by threatening to reveal an unpleasant secret. “Black money” means the money which is earned illegally. As for the Russian connotations there are plenty of them. “Черная бухгалтерия” means the intentionally wrong accounting of money which results in the obtaining of “Black money”. Also there is a word “Очернить” which means “dishonor someone”. [2]

Mostly these two languages are sharing the same connotative meanings, which can be explained by the human’s instincts, geographical position and also wide spreading western culture.

Most of the people have the same idea towards black color. It is strongly associated with dark night. People are afraid of darkness so there is no wonder that in our minds black sometimes evokes the negative emotions.

On the other hand, positive connotation can be explained by another reason. It is obvious that western culture captured the mind of our generation, and not only ours, previous generations were affected by western culture as well so it became a rule to wear a black suit during official meetings or special occasions. This dress code has become international standard.

### **2.2 White and Белый**

White color, just like black color, has strong associations with “purity” or “innocence” in people’s mind. White is the holiest color of Christianity. Jesus and his angels were wearing white dresses according to Christian’s belief. Wedding dress commonly has to be white as well as the interior of the wedding place. Also according to the custom of pigeons release in wedding, pigeons have to be white. In western culture, wedding pigeon release symbolizes the bride’s new life. In addition there are words “white witch” and “white spirit”. “White witch” is a sorceress with “white spirit” who does good deeds to others. “A white sheep” is a metaphor, which indicates the good person among the bunch of evil ones. It should be mentioned that white color has a lot of positive connotations: not only brightness, purity and innocence but also kindness, prosperity and fortune.

Russian culture is sharing the same ideas about white color. In fact there are some equivalents of the phrases which contain word “white”. In the Russian language there is a phrase “Белая овечка: which has the exact same connotation with “White sheep”. The phrase “Белая зависть” can be used under the situation when the person is feeling jealous but does not feel bad about someone’s success. “Рыцарь на белом коне” indicates the person, who is commonly male and saves people in trouble.

Mostly connotations of this color are common for English and Russian culture due to the natural reasons. In our minds unlike the black color, which is associated with dark night, white color is strongly associated with daytime. For sure daytime evokes only the positive thoughts in our mind as long as unlike the dark night. Day is commonly safe. During the daytime, we can see clearly and feel safe. This is the reason why it is hard to find any information about the negative connotation of white color.

### 2.3 Red and Красный

Red is usually associated with celebrations, joyful occasions, love and beauty. This is true for English and Russian cultures. Actually, the red color in Russian culture used to have a meaning of "Beauty". **Красный** - red, **Красивый** - beautiful, **Прекрасный** - Excellent. This is one of the reasons why red color in Russian has mostly positive connotations.

In the west red is the color of the sun as well as the color of the life. Like the sun is shining with the great power, it encourages people to take actions. Because of this, we can say it represents the life, birth, energy and inspired passion. In English red color is commonly used for important people, organizations and occasions. Let’s take a look at the phrase “a red-letter day”, which refers to a holiday. Such days are using red color in calendars rather than black color, which is used for ordinary days. Expression “to paint the town red” means “to enjoy lively time in public places, often by raising attention or simply disturbing others”. Also it’s worth mentioning that celebrities or important people walk on “red carpet” during the special occasions. In Russian culture, one can notice that during the Russian revolution there were two sides, which were fighting for the control of the country: Red army and White army. Red color in that period of time had a meaning of revolution and calling for action and justice. These are the positive connotations.

Red also has negative connotations, which are violence, anger, danger or shyness. Fire trucks use a red alarm signal for indicating the upcoming danger. According to Bible when Adam and Eve committed the original sin, God said to Eve: “I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing, in pain you shall bring forth children.” The great pain that a woman suffers in giving birth to a child is bleeding freely, and that may be the reason why blood became a symbol of misery and “red” *became associated* with danger for English- speaking people.

The difference in connotation, which one can observe is that the red color to indicate the “revolution”. In the other hand in English- speaking countries red has become a symbol of “communism” due to political reasons. It has become an insult for people who support communism ideas. At the first glance, Russian culture and English culture are sharing the perception of the red color. According to psychologists and colorists, red is the warm color, which makes our heartbeat faster and also heightens blood pressure. This is why such connotations like energy, life and anger are true both for English and Russian cultures. As for cultural non-equivalence, we have two connotations: “revolution” and “communist”. This difference in perception has been determined by political relationships and history. In times of cold war, USSR had red flag, which was symbol of the communism. Because of hard relationship between USA and USSR, some English- speaking countries used word “red” to identify the supporter of communistic ideas. This is the reason of such a big difference in perception of this color.

## 2.4 Yellow and Желтый

According to colorists, yellow color makes people think faster and makes them become more tolerant. In combination with other colors, yellow color can irritate and even scare people.

Yellow is the color of wealth, honor and power, although it is the holy color of Christianity. One can spot the connection between Christianity and yellow color simply by taking a closer look at The Father. Usually he wears a golden crucifix and it's worth mentioning that the holy cup, which, according to Christianity, Jesus used in his last supper is yellow as well.

Russian cultures shares the most connotations with English culture. Also in Russian culture, yellow color has strong and positive associations like "warm", "light", "happiness". It is obvious because the sun makes us feel those feelings. In addition to connotations of this color in Russian culture, yellow also has a negative meaning like "irritating", "frightening" or "separation/cheating". "Yellow house" or "желтый домик" in Russian language can have a meaning of mental hospital. "Yellow journalism" or we can say "Желтая пресса" has the meaning of non- trustworthy journals. This connotation is true for both English and Russian cultures.

The cultural equivalence between Russian culture and English culture are obvious. According to colorists, yellow color makes people feel better and think faster. Yellow color has the strong association with sun, which obviously, true for both Russian and English cultures.

The differences are quite peculiar. In Russian language, "Yellow house" has the meaning of mental hospital. That is because in the past mental hospital in Russia were actually yellow both inside and outside. People believed that yellow color could calm some patients down and make them feel better.

## 2.5 Green and Зеленый

Green color is the color of almost all the plants in the world. Humanity used to survive with the help of fruits and vegetables. Because of this, both for Russian and English cultures the connotation of green color remains the same. Green color indicates life, vigor, peace and hope. Green color obviously is strongly associated with plants. If somebody has the "green fingers" or "green thumbs", this person is good at planting. Also "greenhouse" is not a green building but a glass building, which is used for growing plants. "Greenhouse effect" is the gradual warming of the air that surrounds the Earth as the result of heat by pollution. Because green is the color of almost all the plants in their prime, it implies "immature" as in green apple or green corn. This meaning is extended to indicate the lack of experience, training or knowledge. For example "She is not suitable, she is still green at this job" means that she lacks the experience. In addition to previous connotations, green color also has the meaning of "safe". Take traffic lights as a solid proof of this connotation. Green color on traffic lights means that pedestrians are free to go. This is true not only for English culture but also for a lot of other cultures and it became an international symbol of safety.

Mostly Russian culture shares the same ideas with English culture but it also has another connotation of this color. In Russian culture, "green" also means American dollars. For example "Сотня зеленых" means "one hundred dollars".

It is obvious that many basic color terms in different cultures have the same symbolism and implied meanings. The reason is that humanity encounters these colors in nature. Instincts helps human to perceive colors through associations with nature. Green plants, which help humanity survive, for sure evoke only positive connotations in one's mind.

As for the differences in cultural connotation, it is easy to reveal that American dollars have the green color on the banknotes. One can find the connection easily why Russians call dollars "greenies". English culture also has some differences in connotation. Green sometimes mean

“jealous” or “envious”. There is the phrase “green with envy” which serves as a proof for this.

## 2.6 Blue and Синий

In human’s mind, blue has a connection with sea and sky. It is a mystical color, which has a lot of implied meanings behind itself.

It is well known that Britain, especially London, is famous for its foggy weather and blue sky is rare in the island nation. Blue may be strongly linked with sea. (Goddard 1998)

Blue color in western culture has a lot of various meanings. Some people can refer “blue Monday” as their first day at work or school after the pleasant weekend. “Blues” is the slow and sad music, which came from the southern American. Such phrases like “Have the blues” or “in a blue funk” also indicate sadness. Also “blue” refers to a woman with literary or intellectual ability or interest.

Blue is also regarded as a holy color representing sacredness, truth and loyalty, as it is the color of the robes covered on gods and holy bodies. It is also the color of Virgin’s mother Mary robe, hence as a symbol of purity. “Blue blood” refers to a person who has aristocratic origins. It is also argued that French prostitutes of 19<sup>th</sup> century preferred to wear blue clothes. Originated from *La Bibliotheque Bleu*, a series of French books characterized by the filthy stories, “blue” used to be a synonym of “filthiness” or “vulgar” like “blue jokes” or “blue movies”.

There are many expressions with “blue”. “Out of the blue” means news that came suddenly and unexpectedly. “Once in the blue moon” means “small chances of something”. This phrase refers to a rare opportunity because we can hardly see a blue moon.

Russian “Синий” or “blue” has the symbolic meaning of seriousness and coldness.

“Синий” has a lot of cultural differences. Blue color in Russia sometimes represents the sorrow and death. For example: “Губы её были синие, как у мёртвой” (“her lips were blue as if she was dead”).

Drunken person in Russia can be called “Синий” or “blue”. “Синячить” means to drink alcohol in huge amounts.

The homosexual persons in Russia are commonly called “Blue” or “Голубые”.

In many ways, Russian culture shares ideas of connotation of blue color with English speaking countries. Russians also has the equivalent of the phrase “Blue blood” (“Голубая кровь”). In Russia blue color also has the positive connotations for truth and loyalty. This is the reason why Russian’s flag has the blue color.

## 2.7 Purple and Фиолетовый

Purple color in western culture symbolizes the royalty, spirituality and wealth.

It is to say that purple is “rich” color. Queen Elizabeth I forbade anyone except close members of the royal family to wear it. Purple’s elite status stems from the rarity and high cost of the dye originally used to produce it. Purple fabric used to be so outrageously expensive that only rulers could afford it. Jesus wore the purple robe because he called himself the king of the Jews. As long as purple is a “royal” color, he wore the purple robe during his trial.

US military award “Purple Heart” is awarded to those wounded or killed while serving.

In Russia some poets used some shades of purple color to express mystery and melancholy. For example:

“Не жаль мне лет растраченных напрасно, Не жаль души сиреневую цвет...” S. Esenin.[3]

### 3. Causes for Similarities

Indeed, there are lots of similarities of connotations as long as people all over the world share the same perception of the world and nature which was one of the main inspirations for ideas of color connotations.

#### 3.1 Natural Factor

For ancient humans colors were the main non-verbal signals. At the night time, it was hard to see anything and because of that it was dangerous to hunt at night as long as unlike animals people cannot see in the dark or smell out the prey. That is why people all over the world share the same, negative connotation about the black color. The same can be applied to *white and yellow*. White and Yellow colors are the colors of the day. Sun and sky are strongly associated with these two colors. During the day, we can see all clearly; we feel safe and comfortable especially when the weather is clear. This is the reason why different cultures have the same connotation about these colors. Colors of nature are the same for all people and we, as a species, share the same perception of the natural events.

#### 3.2 Geographical Factor

Most of the connotations, share the same ideas because of the geographical reason. As we know, Russia and English-speaking countries which are in Europe, used to be influenced by another European country France. France used to have a great influence on English language and Russian culture. In eighteenth century, Russian aristocracy fell into deep love with French culture and language. As long as France influenced English language a lot, it means that Russia and England had the same source of cultural information, which gave both of them the same ideas about life perception and color connotation.[4]

### 4. Causes for Differences

Differences of connotations of basic colors in different cultures, of course is a common thing as long as representatives of different cultures usually have their own ideas about colors.

#### 4.1 Historical Factor

Let us pick the purple color, mentioned in the previous chapter for instance. There is a connotation of royalty in English culture for the purple color because of the historical event: Queen Elizabeth I forbade anyone except close members of the royal family to wear it, but Russian culture does not share the same connotation.

#### 4.2 Political Factor

Red color can serve us as a good example of the political differences between Russia and England. Because of the civil war between White army and Red army in 1917, representatives of Russian culture got another connotation of the red color, which was “Revolution” while the western countries also got another connotation for the red color, which was “communism”.

#### 4.3 Social Factor

Blue color has the connotation of a drunken person in Russia. This is a perfect example of social



difference and difference between mentality of English and Russian cultures. Russians call drunk persons *blue* because sometimes when person drinks alcohol in company of unfamiliar people, this person can end up been beaten by this company if he would say something unpleasant. Because of the bruises that might appear on the body of the unlucky person, Russian call such persons *blue* because of the color of the bruises. However, in English-speaking countries *blue* has the connotation of “sadness”. [5]

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the author will summarize the study of basic color terms in English and Russian.

Firstly, language and culture depend on each other very much. One affects the other. Language and culture can be affected not only by each other but also by a lot of factors like geography, history, natural and social surroundings. These factors affect languages in many ways and color term is not an exception.

Secondly, color terms can give us a lot of information like cultural and historical background. By looking at the connotations, we can see the years of history and cultural development. In some cases some cultures share the same connotation toward one color because of various factors like natural or geographical factor. Some colors have the same connotation in almost all cultures. In ancient times humanity on its early stages perceived the world by signals from sounds and colors. It is obvious that some signals helped them to survive. Green color, the color of “nature” helped humanity to survive through tough times and mostly green color has the positive connotation while *red* which is associated with “blood and fire” has the negative connotation. That is why we are crossing the road while the traffic light is green. Traffic lights give us a non-verbal message which can inform us that it is safe to cross the road right now. The same can be applied to the red color.

Thirdly, differences in connotations of color words can be explained by the natural, geographical, historical, political and social factors. Russian October Revolution has made up connotations for red color which were “revolution”, “call for action” and “justice” while other countries associated *red* with “communism”. Every culture is not the same. This is the reason why people perceive some colors in different ways.

Fourthly, the implication of the color terms is also very important for language learning. When we are learning the language, it is important to pay attention to the cultural aspect of language. We can avoid some awkward mistakes during the intercultural communication by simply learning more about culture. As color terms and their connotations are the big part of every culture, we just simply cannot ignore color terms. With the help of the color terms, we can take a closer look at the culture, which is a vital part of intercultural communication. [6]

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