COLOUR TERMS:
A PROBLEM FOR TRANSLATORS

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Colour terms are universal in the sense that every language has a certain number of lexemes that are used to refer to colours in that culture. However, as Berlin and Kay (1969) discovered, languages vary in the number of basic colour terms they have, with that number ranging from as many as eleven to as few as two. The symbolic association of certain colours also varies from one language or culture to another. Therefore, translating material from one language to another poses a potential problem if the translator fails to take into account these differences.

A study by Berlin and Kay (1969) of about one hundred languages revealed that not only does the number of colour terms vary from language to language, but so also does the hierarchy or encoding sequence of those terms. As has already been noted, the number of colour terms ranges from two to 11. However, in that original study, as well as in subsequent ones, Berlin and Kay found that there is a systematic pattern to the sequence in which basic color terms are added to a language. If the language has only two colour terms, they will invariably be terms for black and white. Of the 98 languages examined by Berlin and Kay, approximately ten percent fell into this category. If there are three basic colour terms, the third one will invariably be red. Another 20% of Berlin and Kay's sample were found to have only three colour terms: black, white, and red (pp. 46, 52). The research showed that if there is a fourth term, it will be either green or yellow, and if there is a fifth one, it will always be the other of the two. A sixth term will always be blue and a seventh will be brown. Those languages with eight to eleven terms will add lexemes for purple, pink, orange, and gray. It is interesting to note that the Russian language apparently actually has twelve basic colour terms, because it makes a lexical distinction between dark blue and light blue (p. 99; Davies 1998: 3).

What needs to be underlined, however, is that whether the language has two, three, four, or however many basic colour terms, the entire spectrum of colours is still covered by those terms. The Dani people of Papua New Guinea subsume the entire spectrum of colours under two terms, corresponding to our black and white (Scharmer 1999); in a high percentage of African languages, as well as in Poma

(an American Indian language spoken in California) and in several Australian
Aboriginal languages, a third colour, red, is added to those two universal colour
terms (Finegan and Besnier 1989: 250). In addition to terms for black, white and
red, Somali has a term for green, whereas Tongan (a Polynesian language) and
Ancient Greek have a term for yellow, rather than one for green (Finegan and
Besnier 1989: 250). In the Tarahumara language of Mexico, there are five basic
colour words, with yellow being the fourth, and blue and green being grouped
under a single term, as the fifth one (Nida 1966: 13). The problem for the translator
is to know what the boundaries of each term are: does what we call "gray", for
instance, fall under black or under white in a language with only two terms? How
pale does "pale yellow" need to be for it to be considered white rather than red in
a three-term system?

Obviously, those languages with the most number of colour terms will present
the least potential problem of equivalency for the translator. However, the fewer
the terms, the most difficult it becomes to convey nuances of colour terminology,
and what the translator must bear in mind is that the span along the spectrum that
the basic colour term covers is not universal.

An additional problem that arises is the fact that in many languages, the
lexemes which are used to express colours may also have other meanings. For
instance, in the Tikar language of Cameroon, which has the three-term system
typical among African languages, *pean* the word for red also means 'ripe', and
pwɛbbi 'white' can also be translated 'clean' in certain contexts. The third term,
lo 'black' is also 'dark', as in describing the absence of light at nighttime. How-
ever, unlike certain other languages (as in Berinmo, below), the Tikar word for
black does not have the meaning "dirty", nor is the word for white used to mean
"a white-skinned person". In the Dani language, which, as we have seen, has only
two colour terms, the term which is normally translated as 'black' also means
'dark-cool' and white has the meanings 'light-warm' (Levinson; Berlin and Kay,
1969: 46).

Paul Kay (2002) provides an interesting example of the varied use that may
be made of colour terms in a quote that he includes from Roberson et al. (1999:
371–372) concerning the Berinmo language of Papua New Guinea. According to
Roberson et al.:

> Berinmo has five basic color terms ... The names of the Berinmo
> terms are *vapa* (both the term for a European person and for 'white'
> and all very pale colors); *kel* (both the term for 'black', for 'char-
> coal' or for anything burnt, but also meaning 'dirty'); *mehi* (the term
> for 'red' and the color of the fruit of the red Pandanus palm); *wor*
> (the term for leaves ready to fall from a tree and covering a range of
> 'yellow/orange/brown/khaki') and *nol* (the term meaning 'live' and
> covering 'green/yellow-green/blue/purple').

The translator also needs to be aware of the use of modifying terms, a strategy by which some languages encode certain colour distinctions that their basic colour terms do not allow them to make. For instance, in Mandarin Chinese, a six-term system (Finegan and Besnier 1989: 251), the term for pink is 'shallow red', while gray is 'the colour of dirt — i.e. the colour of the ground'. To allow speakers to distinguish between red and crimson, Chinese makes use of the adjective "very", and "burgundy" is 'dark red'. For a Tikar speaker, the colours within the boundaries of the three basic colours are simply referred to by the modifying term: "a certain kind of ... ". For instance, 'scarlet' would be *pean ndɔʔ* 'a certain kind of red'.

The use of object glosses is another strategy that is often used when it is necessary to talk about a colour for which the language does not have a basic term. English colour terms such as "brick", "olive" and "peach" are all examples of object glosses. The Tikar use this strategy when they use *kæ ʔflɔa* 'fresh/new leaf' to refer to the colour green, and for the Bamileke of south-western Cameroon, who also have a three-colour system, 'yellow' is 'red as a banana', 'green' is 'black as a leaf', and 'blue' is 'black as the sky'. It may also be described as 'black as the widow's clothes', since in traditional Bamileke culture, widows dressed in blue.[1] In all countries around the world, it is probably safe to assume that a red traffic light means "stop", a green one means "go" and a yellow one demands "caution". However, it is not quite so simple in other realms of the culture, as in, for instance, colour symbolism. In Chinese and Indian cultures, red is used for celebrations and can symbolize good luck. It is also used in wedding outfits to symbolize purity.[2] If we look at the colours associated with death and mourning, we also find considerable variation cross-culturally. While many Western cultures use black to symbolize death, in many Eastern cultures, people wear white to funerals. And in Buddhist tradition, the name of the deceased is printed not in black but in red (Conaway and Morrison 1998).

Not only does the number of colour terms vary greatly from language to language, but so does the way that the existing terms are used. Even languages as closely related as German and English may differ in what colour term they use in a similar expression. For instance, a German who gets hit in the eye will have a "blue" eye not a "black" one, while in Poland, the same accident will result in a "purple/violet" eye. These are only two examples of the caveats that practiced bilinguals would enunciate for the less-practiced translator.

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[1] Personal telephone conversation with Raymond Mopoho, a Bamileke speaker (Moncton, May 2004).

[2] Personal conversation with Edith Samuel and Zhan Yang (Moncton, January, 2004).

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