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MEANINGS OF *WHITE* AND *BLACK* IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN IDIOMS: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS[*]

ABSTRACT: This paper deals with the meanings of two colour terms, namely English *white* and *black* and Serbian *beo* and *crn*. A contrastive analysis of the two pairs of adjectives is based on a corpus of 35 English and Serbian phrasal and clausal idioms, like *Two blacks do not make a white* in English and *Od dva zla ne može ispasti dobro* in Serbian. The main aim of the research is to point to stylistic and semantic aspects of two colour categories, *white* and *black*, in English and Serbian idioms. More specific aims deal with the meanings these colour categories express in the process of describing human characteristics, both mental characteristics and appearance, as well as determining whether such meanings are identical or similar in two contrasted languages. The analysis shows, furthermore, there is a high degree of correspondence between the two contrasted languages in respect of the expression of meanings of *white*/*beo* and *black*/*crn* which are culturally accepted in both languages.

Key words: white, black, idioms, meanings, English, Serbian, contrastive analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The way humans perceive and grasp the phenomenon of colours may largely depend on their cultural background. In the European culture, for instance, *black* denotes sadness, misfortune, evil, etc., whereas, in the Asian culture, *white* denotes grief, sorrow, etc. Therefore, this paper conducts a research on a well-known *white-black* dichotomy in the two compared and contrasted languages, English and Serbian. Its main aim is to focus on the semantic and stylistic aspects of two basic colour terms, English *white* and *black*, and Serbian *beo* and *crn*, with the ranges of meanings that these colour terms express. The paper further compares and

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contrasts idioms describing human characteristics expressed by the two colour categories and determines whether their form and meanings are identical or similar in the two contrasted languages, English and Serbian.

1.1. Colours and their properties – theoretical background

As far as the origin of the term *colour* is concerned, the lexeme *boja* (colour) in the Serbian language originated from the Turkish language (*boya, boyama*), and according to Skok`s *Etimologijski rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskoga jezika*, it is common in all languages of the Balkans (Skok 1971: 182). In British English, the lexeme *colour* is used, whereas in American English it is *color*. Various studies held over time reveal that "the colour perception of people is the result of a common set of neurophysiological processes" (McDaniel 1972). This theory even claims that colours are not objectively 'out there in the world', independent of any beings. Colour concepts are rather embodied, as focal colours are partly determined by human biology (Lakoff 1987: 29). In Berlin & Kay`s book *Basic Colour Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (1969), the authors examine the connection of colour terms expressions between different languages and cultures. According to their thorough analysis of colour categories, all languages share a universal system of basic colour categorization. They argue that there are 11 universal basic colour categories (*white, black*, *red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and grey*).

Some colour terms are termed as basic while others are not. Steinvall (2002: 16) and Lakoff (1987: 25) state that basic colour terms are monolexemic (green rather than dark green or grass-coloured), their signification is not included in those of any other colour term (scarlet for example, is contained within red), their application is not restricted to a narrow class of objects (blond for example, is restricted to hair) and they are psychologically salient for the informants, common and generally known (like yellow as opposed to saffron).

According to Berlin & Kay there is an internal gradation in colour categories which makes it possible to isolate a focus of the category, a best example which makes comparisons across languages possible. The authors found that, in the domain of colour, there are certain focal points which people find easier to identify than nonfocal areas. The linguistic terms corresponding to the focal points are then called "basic colour terms" (BCTs). They occur in a fixed order in a language and are represented in a typology of seven stages (Steinvall 2002: 18):

I WHITE and BLACK
II RED
III GREEN or YELLOW
IV GREEN and YELLOW
V BLUE
VI BROWN
VII PURPLE PINK ORANGE GREY

This implies that Stage I languages have only the colours *white* (light-warm) and *black* (dark-cool), which denote a well-known dichotomy in every culture. Furthermore, languages in Stage VII have eight or more basic colour terms. This includes English, which has eleven basic colour terms.

1.1.1. Perceptions and definitions of *white* and *black*

White and *black* belong to the first stage of Berlin and Kay`s typology. As Ivić (1995: 15-16) claims, they are considered "two opposed extremes on a colour continuum". Therefore, in the process of perspectivisation, we distinguish between the two by the criterion of increasing/decreasing brightness and darkness. Metaphorically speaking, *black* denotes morally corrupt, negative features, whereas, *white* denotes morally pure, positive features. Humans, naturally consider *black* as negative and white as positive psychological phenomena.

According to Z. Pavlović (1977: 32), "the symbolism of two colours relies on human non-linguistic environment". In other words, daylight enables people to see and understand the world around them, whereas, night disables them from seeing clearly. The renowned linguist Kövecses makes a significant remark on the meanings of basic colour terms *white* and *black* when using a conceptual metaphor in his explanation of life as a journey:

> "Life is understood as a journey to some destination.
> Moreover, it is metaphorically day, light, warmth and others.
> Birth is conceived of as arrival, whereas death is viewed as
> departure, as well as night, darkness and cold." (Kövecses 2010: 26)

White, being on the opposite end of the continuum, denotes purity, light, innocence, optimism, etc. Thus, in the European countries, for example, "it is typical of wedding bureaus to be all in white, and it is impossible to imagine a European bride wearing a black wedding dress" (Krimer 2011: 80).

The *Oxford Advanced Learners` Dictionary* (OALD 2000: 1477) defines *white* as: 1) having the colour of fresh snow or milk, 2) belonging to or connected with a race of people who have pale skin, 3) pale because of emotion or illness, 4) with milk added.

Black is defined as: 1) having the very darkest colour, like night or coal, 2) without light; completely dark. Its transferred (extended) meaning denotes a person 3) belonging to a race of people who have dark skin; connected with black people, 4) without milk (tea, coffee), 5) very dirty; covered with dirt; a person 6) full of anger or hatred; a situation 7) without hope; very depressing; 8) evil or wicked, 9) dealing with unpleasant or terrible things, such as murder, in a humorous way (OALD 2000: 115).

1.2. Idioms - structure and meaning

According to Prćić (2008: 158), idioms are considered to be regular, in certain cases, systematic clusters of two or, sometimes more, semantic and functional lexemes, within a certain phrase or clause. From the point of view of syntax, it is possible to distinguish three groups of words which function as idioms: *phrasal lexemes*, *discourse formulas* and *catch phrases*. "*Phrasal lexemes* are hybrid lexical units structured as phrases, which act as lexemes in terms of function, content and use; opposite to them, simple, derived and compound lexemes are formally realized as words" (Lyons 1981: 145). There are two subtypes of *phrasal lexemes*: verbless (e.g. *black sheep*, *black and white*) and verbal (e.g. *black out*) (Prćić 2008: 163). The second type of idioms are *discourse formulas* which represent conventionally conditioned utterances in a particular communication situation, e.g. *How do you do? Of course!* (Prćić 2008: 165).

The third type of idioms, *sayings*, contain catch phrases (e.g. *Who`s afraid of the big bad wolf?*) and traditional phrases (e.g. *The pot calls the kettle black*), which are used as reactions to certain communication situations (ibid). It is necessary to point out here that only phrasal lexemes and clauses will be in the focus of this analysis.

As far as meaning is concerned, idioms represent complex structures of lexemes which overall meaning is not the pure sum of the meanings of its constituent parts. The notion of idiomaticity being the basic feature of idioms, implies that certain diagnostic features are either lost or added to the basic structure of an idiom, thus creating a structure with an unpredictable meaning (Prćić 2008: 159). The paper discusses positive and negative meanings expressed by two colour categories in English and Serbian.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE CORPUS

A contrastive analysis of two pairs of adjectives is conducted in several stages. First, the idioms containing colour terms *white/black* in English and *beo/crn* in Serbian are identified. Next, they are organised into two large groups according to colour terms they contain, the idioms with the colour term *white* (Serb. *beo*) and those with the colour term *black* (Serb. *crn*). What follows is the analysis of stylistic and semantic aspects of *white* and *black* in the examples expressing human characteristics. It has to be pointed out that the human characteristics observed in the paper imply both mental characteristics and appearance. An attempt was made to compare and contrast the idioms containing *white/beo* and *black/crn* colour terms which are culturally accepted and equally used in both languages. In addition, the lexemes with the closest meanings possible to those of *white/beo* and *black/crn* were also taken into consideration during the analysis (e.g. *pale*, *ash-coloured*, etc., for *white* or *bled* etc., for *beo* ; *death*, *dark*, *gloomy*, etc., for *black* or *mrk*, *(zlo)voljan*, etc., for *crn*).

The corpus was collected from the following English and Serbian dictionaries: *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms* (1995), *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* (1990), *Oxford English Idioms* (1988), *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms* (1986), *Englesko-srpski rečnik fraza i idioma* (1995), *Srpsko-engleski rečnik idioma, izraza i izreka* (1992)*, Srpsko-engleski rečnik idioma* (1991), *Englesko-srpski frazeološki rečnik* (1996, 1997), *Srpsko-engleski frazeološki rečnik* (2002), and online sources:

http://www.idiomconnection.com/color.html#B,
http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/black/white,
https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?...White%20Kni.

The corpus consists of 35 English phrasal and clausal idioms, with 15 examples containing the colour lexeme *white/beo*, and 20 examples containing the colour lexeme *black/crn* (Table 1). The corpus is divided into two large groups according to colours. They are all English and Serbian idioms containing *white/beo* and *black/crn* colour terms, followed by short explanations regarding structure and meaning.

Table 1: Number of Idioms in the Corpus

No	Colours	Number of Idioms	%
1	white	61	44
2	black	79	56
	Total:	140	100

2.1. White/beo

It is conventionally accepted that *white* is the colour of goodness, innocence, purity, etc. (explained in more detail in 1.1.1). However, it also expresses one`s poor health, state of fear, shock, etc., both in English and Serbian. The following examples discuss the meanings of English *white* and Serbian *beo* denoting human characteristics.

The expression *white knight* could be interpreted in two ways. When referring to a person, it denotes someone who is honest and noble (Serb. *koji je nevin, neiskvaren, dobronameran (dobar, pošten, plemenit čovek*), brave and honorable (Serb. *hrabar, častan, dostojan divljenja (vitez na **belom** konju*)). However, when referring to business, it denotes a person or an organization that rescues a company from being bought by another company at too low a price (Serb. *osoba ili organizacija koja sprečava da kompanija bude prodata po niskoj ceni*) (Krimer 2011: 243).

As white as a ghost/sheet and *white in/about the gills* mean to be very pale because of fear, shock, illness, etc. *White* signifies the colour of one`s face, appearance, caused by stressful situations. In Serbian, it is *bled kao smrt; beo kao kreč, čaršav. "*The Serbian expression *bled* depicts the unfavorable physiological or phychological condition of one`s skin – the person is either ill or is in a state of shock" (Ivić 1995: 38-39). Similarly*,* the English expressions *to lose (one's) colour/complexion, to be/become pale, to get an ashen/ash-coloured/colourless complexion, as pale as death/dead white* retain the same meaning, whereas the form is similar to that in the Serbian language *pobledeti/izgubiti boju, mrtvački bled.*

2.2. Black/crn

The colour *black* is widely connected with bad, ominous, malignant meanings (explained in more detail in 1.1.1). The following examples discuss the meanings of English *black* and Serbian *crn* denoting human characteristics, including both mental characteristics and appearance.

The idioms *as black as pitch/coal, jet black / crn kao katran/đavo/ugalj,* depict one`s appearance where the original meaning of the colour *black* is retained. Stylistic and semantic aspects of both adjectives in the two contrasted languages coincide.

To beat someone black and blue / izudarati koga na mrtvo ime, istući koga kao mačku, poplaveo/pomodreo/sav u modricama. If a person is covered with bruise marks caused by being hit, they have been beaten *black and blue*. In Serbian it is *poplaveo, pomodreo, sav u modricama* where the meaning is retained, whereas the Serbian lexeme *crn*, is omitted. Similarly, *black eye* denotes a bruise near one`s eye which makes it appear *black*. In Serbian, it is *modrica ispod oka,* or, in terms of slang, *šljiva ispod oka,* which alludes to dark blue colour, Serb. *modar,* rather than *black*.

A black look / mrko gledati signifies that a person is full of anger, dislike. The colour *black* in the English idiom refers to anger and resentment. As far as stylistic and semantic aspects are concerned, it is evident that the Serbian adjective *mrk* is used instead of *black*, whereas the meaning remains the same in both languages.

Another expression, *to be in a black mood* means to be irritable, angry or even depressed (where *black mood* refers to sadness, ill temper, depression). Its Serbian counterpart is *biti zlovoljan*, where the lexeme *crn* is not used explicitly. Instead, the adjective *zlovoljan* (Serb.) conveys the closest negative meaning expressed by the adjective *crn* (Eng. *black*).

To blacken someone's character/name/reputation / ocrniti koga, okaljati nečiji karakter/ime/ugled, naružiti koga, opanjkati koga refers to an attempt of diminishing one`s qualities and positive characteristics. The structure and meaning in both languages remains the same. Similarly, the idiom *not as black as one is painted / ne biti tako crn kao što izgleda/kao što ljudi govore/kako ga slikaju,* accentuates one`s positive characteristics despite someone else`s effort to diminish them. Also, the meaning is the same in English and Serbian.

Black sheep (of a family) implies a nonconformist; an unusual or unconventional person, or a person who behaves very differently or badly, and is considered disreputable by the other members of the family. Its Serbian counterpart is *crna ovca (familije)* which retains the original structure and meaning.

Another example from spoken English which relates *black* to bad, ominous phenomena is *two blacks do not make a white* and indicates the impossibility of expecting anything good from two bad things put together. In Serbian, it is *zlom se zlo ne da ispraviti.* Both idioms retain the same meaning, though the Serbian

example contains the lexeme *zlo* instead of the colour lexeme *crn* and *dobro* instead of the colour lexeme *beo*. However, it is the meanings of these colours that represent a cultural point of similarity at which these two languages overlap.

The English idiom *swear black is white* is found in Serbian as *zakleti se da je crno belo*, which confirms the identity of stylistic and semantic aspects of the English and Serbian colour terms *white/beo* and *black/crn*.

3. RESULTS

Following the corpus analysis of 35 English and Serbian idioms each, this section deals with the results and some general conclusions deduced from them. The stylistic features of the English and Serbian idioms which are compared and contrasted are termed as identical and similar. Identical features imply the same form of colour lexemes in two contrasted languages, *white/black* in English and *beo/crn* in Serbian. Similar features point out certain differences in form between English and Serbian (e.g. *pale, gloomy* instead of *white/black* and *bled, mrk, zlovoljan* instead of *beo/crn*). These features are shown within the Table 2. Semantic features refer to the meanings of the English *white/black* and Serbian *beo/crn* which remain identical in all idioms and are not given within the Table 2.

Table 2: Stylistic Features of the English and Serbian Idioms

ENGLISH IDIOMS vs. SERBIAN TRANSLATION EQUIVALENTS		
SEMANTIC FEATURES	white (%)	black (%)
Identical	87	77
Similar	11	17
Different	2	6

4. DISCUSSION

This paper addresses the advantages and limitations of a corpus-based approach to researching and analyzing 35 English and Serbian idioms containing the colour lexemes *white/black* and *beo/crn*. This section of the paper deals with the results of the analysis and some general conclusions deduced from them.

As far as the idioms with the colour lexemes *white*/*beo* are concerned, the results reveal that the meanings in the two contrasted languages remain the same. *White*/*beo* is conventionally accepted as a colour category denoting goodness, purity, happiness, honesty (e.g. *white knight*/*vitez na belom konju* (dobričina, heroj)) as well as sickness, poor health, state of fear, shock, etc., both in English and Serbian (e.g. *as white as a sheet / beo kao čaršav*). However, in terms of form, certain English idioms differ from their Serbian counterparts (e.g. *to get an ash-coloured complexion* / *pobledeti/izgubiti boju*). As it was stated at the beginning of the analysis, the lexemes with the closest meanings possible to those of *white*/*beo* were also taken into consideration during the analysis (e.g. *pale*, *ash-coloured*, etc., for *white* or *bled* etc., for *beo*).

Similarly, the idioms with the colour lexemes *black/crn* share identical semantic features in the corpus of 20 selected idioms. As previous theoretical background on the semantic aspect of colour terms has shown, and as it is attested in the present research, the colour lexemes *black/crn* denote bad, ominous, malignant meanings, people who are socially unacceptable, anger, dislike, resentment, depression, etc., in English and Serbian equally (e.g. *as black as pitch* / *crn kao katran*; *a black sheep of the family / crna ovca u familiji*). In terms of form, there are evident differences between the English and Serbian idioms (e.g. *to be in a black mood* / *biti zlovoljan*) where the explicit use of lexemes *black*/*crn* is omitted.

Also, the lexemes with the closest meanings possible to those of *black*/*crn* were considered during the analysis (e.g. *death*, *dark*, *gloomy*, etc., for *black* or *mrk*, *(zlo)voljan*, etc., for *crn*).

The results achieved throughout this analysis represent another confirmation of the theoretical background on the stylistic and semantic aspects of the two adjectives displayed in previous chapters. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the selected examples of idioms containing *white/beo* and *black/crn* colour lexemes belong to the repertoire of idioms which are culturally accepted, and used in both languages.

5. CONCLUSION

The main aim of the research are the stylistic and semantic aspects of the two pairs of adjectives, English *white* and *black* and Serbian *beo* and *crn*. The paper further compares and contrasts the idioms describing human characteristics expressed by two colour categories. The aim of a thorough study conducted in the paper is to determine whether their forms and meanings are identical or similar in two contrasted languages, English and Serbian. After having considered all the selected idioms, the analysis shows that there is a relatively high degree of correspondence between the two contrasted languages in respect of the expression of meanings denoted by the colour categories *white/beo* (e.g. happiness, innocence, fear, shock, etc.) and *black/crn* (e.g. misfortune, illness, wickedness, etc.). It is worth noting that the stylistic aspects of the two contrasted pairs of adjectives represent the point of difference due to which the two compared languages differ.

Finally, a contrastive analysis of this kind can be of great help to better understand the meanings of the English idioms with the colour terms *white* and *black*, on the one hand, and the Serbian idioms with the colour terms *beo* and *crn*, on the other. What can be done in the future is to perform a more detailed analysis on a larger corpus, which would reveal some other examples of idioms containing the two colours, and allow different interpretations to appear.

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ZNAČENJA *BELE* I *CRNE* BOJE U ENGLESKIM I SRPSKIM IDIOMIMA: KONTRASTIVNA ANALIZA

Rezime

U radu se razmatra semantička priroda dve kategorije osnovnih boja, *white* i *black* u engleskom jeziku i *beo* i *crn* u srpskom jeziku. Kontrastivna analiza dva para prideva zasnovana je na korpusu sačinjenom od 35 engleskih i srpskih fraznih i rečeničnih idioma, kao, na primer, *Two blacks do not make a white* na engleskom i *Od dva zla ne može ispasti dobro* na srpskom. Glavni cilj istraživanja su stilski i semantički aspekti ove dve kategorije osnovnih boja, *bele* i *crne*, u engleskim i srpskim idiomima. Konkretniji ciljevi tiču se značenja ova dva para boja prilikom opisivanja ljudskih osobina, kako psihičkih tako i fizičkih, kao i utvrđivanja njihove istosti, odnosno sličnosti u dva suprotstavljena jezika. Rezultati analize jasno pokazuju da postoji visok stepen podudarnosti između ova dva suprotstavljena jezika po pitanju značenja izraženih dvema kategorijama osnovnih boja, *white* i *black* u engleskom i *beo* i *crn* u srpskom jeziku, u idiomima koji su deo repertoara koji se prirodno koristi u oba jezika.

Ključne reči: bela, crna, idiomi, značenja, engleski, srpski, kontrastivna analiza.

APPENDIX: THE LIST OF EXAMPLES

English idioms	Serbian idioms
WHITE	**BEO**
As **white** as a sheet/chalk	**Beo** kao kreč/čaršav/krpa/kao da nema kapi krvi
As **pale** as death/dead **white**	Mrtvački **bled**
Pale around the gills, **white** in/around the gills	**Bled** kao krpa
To lose (one's) colour/complexion, to be/become **pale**, to get an ashen/ash-coloured/colourless complexion	**Pobledeti**/izgubiti boju
White knight	a. (o čoveku)1. Koji je nevin, neiskvaren, dobronameran (dobar, pošten, plemenit čovek) 2. Koji je hrabar, častan, dostojan divljenja (vitez na **belom** konju) b. (u poslovanju) osoba ili organizacija koja sprečava da kompanija bude prodata po niskoj ceni
BLACK	**CRN**
As **black** as pitch/coal, jet **black**	**Crn** kao katran/đavo/ugalj
To beat someone **black** and blue	Izudarati koga na mrtvo ime, istući koga kao mačku, poplaveo/pomodreo/sav u modricama
Black eye	Modrica ispod oka
A **black** look	Mrko pogledati koga, smrknut pogled
To be in a **black** mood	Biti zlovoljan
To take a gloomy/pessimistic view of everything, to look on the dark side of something, to look for rainy clouds (inf.)	Videti sve **crno**
To bring calamity/affliction/distress on someone, to be the death of someone	Zaviti u **crno** koga
To **blacken** someone's character/ name/ reputation	**Ocrniti** koga, okaljati nečiji karakter/ ime/ugled, naružiti koga, opanjkati koga
Not as **black** as one is painted	Ne biti tako **crn** kao što izgleda/kao što ljudi govore/kako ga slikaju
A **black** sheep of the family	**Crna** ovca u familiji

*Two **blacks** don't make a **white***	*Zlom se zlo ne da ispraviti*
*Swear **black** is **white***	*Zakleti se da je **crno belo***