THE CONNOTATIONS OF ARABIC COLOUR TERMS[*]
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Abstract. Following Allan (2009), this paper investigates the X-phemistic uses of Arabic colour terms with especial reference to Jordanian Arabic. The study, adopting colour-based metaphors, explores the figurative uses of black, white, yellow, red, green, and blue; the most common colours that are used figuratively. The connotations of Arabic colour terms are judged on the basis of whether the phrases in which colour terms occur are orthophemistic, euphemistic, or dysphemistic. It could be said, building on the colours explored in this study, that colours have many orthophemistic connotations, and that dysphemistic connotations of the colours under study are more common than euphemistic connotations. It was also found that the uses of black, yellow, red and blue are predominantly dysphemistic. In contrast, white mostly has positive connotations, but green is found to be associated with both euphemistic and dysphemistic connotations.

1. Preamble

Besides their literal senses, Arabic colour terms could be used loaded with different connotative meanings that are realized in conventional linguistic expressions such as black-handed, white record, and yellow leaf. This indeed implies that “the connotation of a language expression is clearly distinct from its sense, denotation and reference” (Allan 2007). Seen as a thoroughly pragmatic category of meaning, the connotations of a language expression are defined by Allan (2007) as “pragmatic effects that arise from encyclopaedic knowledge about its denotation (or reference) and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used,” and this implies that most of the connotative meanings assigned to colours seem to be grounded, at least to some extent, in reality (Niemeier 1998, cited in Philip 2006: 88). This led Allan (2009: 627) to propose that objects that give rise to the connotations of colour terms have to be colour-bearing objects.

The connotative meaning is defined as the secondary meaning of a word or expression besides its explicit or primary meaning. Leech (1981: 23) classifies meaning into conceptual meaning and associative meaning. He defines the conceptual meaning as the essential part of what language is and the central factor in verbal communication. Conceptual meaning is called cognitive, logical, or denotative meaning. Leech (1981) also recognizes six types of associative meaning: connotative, social, affective, reflective, collocative, and thematic meaning. Connotative meaning is defined as what is communicated by virtue of

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what language refers to. Social meaning is the meaning which an expression conveys about the contexts or social circumstances of its use. Affective meaning is what is communicated of the feelings and attitudes of the speaker/writer. Reflected meaning is what is communicated through association with another sense of the same expression. Collocative meaning is what is communicated through association with words which tend to occur in the environment of another word. Finally, thematic meaning is defined as what is communicated by the way in which the message is organized in terms of order and emphasis. Connotative meaning, in comparison with conceptual meaning, is relatively unstable and may vary according to culture, historical period, and the experience of the individual.

Cruse (1986) classifies non-propositional meaning into expressive, presupposed, and evoked meaning. Jeffries (1998: 109–44) explains that connotation refers to the expressive and evoked meaning discussed in Cruse (1986). In this study, connotation, used in opposition with denotation and sense, refers to the expressive meaning (also called emotive, attitudinal, or affective meaning) which enables speakers to communicate their evaluations or attitudes.

Colour terms seem to have a great potential of developing different extended meanings. Such extension of meanings could be developed either through metaphoricalization, which is “[…] the analogical mapping of more concrete terms from source domain onto a more abstract term in the target domain” (Traugott – Dasher 2002: 72), or through metonymization, defined as the semantic process of using a part for the whole or one entity is used to stand for another associated entity (Lakoff – Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987, 1993; Traugott – Dasher 2002). The semantic extension is said to be grounded in people’s understanding and interpretation of the physical world and is not accidental but pragmatic because it is always context-dependent (Traugott – Dasher 2002: 24). Xing (2009: 88) contends that each colour term has three types of meanings: original meaning, extended meaning, and abstract meaning. Original meaning is defined as the etymological meaning of the colour term; extended meaning is the meaning extended from the original meaning through metaphor, metonymy, or other cognitive means; and abstract meaning refers to the meaning that has been further abstracted from the extended meaning.

Because the colour systems of Arabic and English are not connotationally identical, this study reports on the connotations of Arabic colour terms as an under-researched area of the Arabic pragmatics. This being the case, the study will unveil the similarities and dissimilarities with respect to the connotations of the basic colour terms in Arabic and English, though a discussion of the connotations of the basic colour terms in some other languages, other than English, is sometimes included. Unlike Manav (2006) and Kaya – Crosby (2006) whose findings indicate that colour associations seem to rely on individuals’ previous knowledge and experience, this study explores the culturally determined connotations. That is, connotations that are based on cultural conventions and stereotypes, not on the individuals’ experiences. The figurative uses of colour terms examined in this study are assumed to represent the established and/or societal connotations of the basic Arabic colour terms that all people are assumed to know. This study stresses the significance of the cultural context, in that differences of the cultural context produce the most significant differences in colour term connotation between languages (Crisp – Chang 1987: 53). In the same vein, Elliot et al. (2007: 156) explain that colour meaning may be a matter of context. Likewise, Soriano – Valenzuela (2009: 440) hypothesize that in case of valence this might
be so, in that Spaniards, for example, may regard ROJO (red) and AMARILLO (yellow) very positively because they are the two colours of the Spanish flag and because red and yellow outfits are typically used to represent the country in international competitions“. It is an interesting possibility that the two colours may have lately become particularly positive in people’s minds as a result of Spain winning the UEFA European Football Championship after 44 years, as well as the Davis Cup in tennis” (ibid.: 440). This indeed demonstrates the significance of the cultural context in determining the connotations of the basic colour terms.

In the cultural context of Jordan, white and green may be viewed positively, in that white normally stands for innocence, purity, and peace; and green is almost associated with safety and agriculture. However, black, red, and yellow could be valued negatively, as black is often associated with evil-related issues, red could signify danger and crime, and yellow is nearly always linked to sickness. In what follows, I review some of the previous studies conducted on the extended meanings of the basic colour terms.

2. Theoretical background

As mentioned at the outset, colour words are loaded with multiple connotative meanings, many of which are realized in conventional linguistic expressions. This, therefore, has invited researchers from different disciplines to extensively study the connotative meanings of basic colour terms inter- and intra-culturally. Adams – Osgood (1973) study the connotative structure of the English colour terms black, white, grey, red, yellow, green and blue and their equivalent colour terms in 20 other languages of the world using the Semantic Differential Technique. They find that young adult subjects rated the colour name white more positively than black in all of the 23 language-culture groups studied in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Adams – Osgood (1973) find that the colour red is an ambiguous case and they locate it near the neutral point. The colour red is said to have a positive valence and a negative valence, depending on the features to which it is associated. As for yellow, they (1973: 144–5) find that yellow-like terms tend to be positively evaluated across languages, though they have a very negative connotation in Hong Kong Cantonese, where the colour yellow is associated with pornography. Adams – Osgood (1973: 144) conclude that the semantic blue-green region is more highly evaluated than the red-yellow region.

As reported by Chan – Courtney (2001), Osgood et al. (1975) use four categories of colour associations: (1) concrete identification – names of things having a given colour (e.g., blue sky, green cabbage); (2) concrete associations – names of things culturally associated with a colour (e.g., black bow tie); (3) abstract association – metaphorical, (e.g., blue Monday, yellow-bellied, pink film); and (4) abstract symbolism – culturally significant concepts and not obviously metaphorical (e.g., red communism). Some colour associations are considered as universal, such as red for warmth and passion and white for cleanliness, though cross-cultural differences are noted to exist (Jacobs et al. 1991). That said, fire and the sun are yellow in English but red in Japanese and Chinese. Purple has connotations of anger and passion for Americans, but connotes to royalty only for Chinese and Japanese. And yellow does not customarily suggest or imply cowardice for Asians as it does for Americans (Kiato – Kiato 1986).
Because colour names have great potential to refer metonymically to real world objects and phenomena, many metonymically-motivated meanings could be associated with colour words, like when credits are notated in black ink, and debts in red (Philip 2006: 61, 80). Examining the use of colour-word metaphors in English and Italian, Philip (2006) pays particular attention to the ways in which colour words take on connotative meanings and to the similarities and differences across the two languages. The author hypothesizes that because the colours chosen in conventional linguistic expressions are not selected actively by the speaker, but rather predetermined by the habitual patterns of the language, these language habits subsequently affect the speaker’s, and the language community’s perception of colour.

Evaluating the responses to bright colours, Saito (1996) and Hemphill (1996) find that brighter colours – including white, pink, red, yellow, blue, purple, and green – evoke positive responses, whereas darker ones – including black and gray – evoke negative responses. Positive responses include happiness, excitement, relaxation, and being positive, whereas negative responses are related to anxiety, boredom, sadness, and being negative. In another subsequent study charged with examining the emotional responses of college students to five principle colours, Kaya – Epps (2004) find that the colour green evokes positive emotions such as relaxation and comfort. As for the achromatic colours, they find that white has the largest number of positive responses. By the same token, Manav (2007) finds that responses to bright colour samples are positive. These findings seem to be in line with those of Meier and his colleagues (Meier et al. 2004; Meier et al. 2007) who are inclined to establish a compulsory systematic association between brightness and valence. That is, light colours automatically elicit a positive evaluation of objects, whereas dark colours elicit a negative one.

Allan (2009) investigates the connotations of English colour terms black, white, grey, brown, yellow, red, green, blue and a few miscellaneous colours in terms of ‘X-phemisms’; a term which was used in Allan – Burridge (2006) to describe the union set of orthophemisms (straight-talking), dysphemisms (offensive language), and euphemisms (sweet-talking). Orthophemisms and euphemisms are a substitution for words, phrases, or expressions that are offensive or unpleasant, using less offensive language. The use of orthophemisms and euphemisms could be enhanced by the need to hide the identity of the subject of the conversation from potential eavesdroppers, or by the need to be polite. That is, euphemisms and orthophemisms could be used to protect the speaker’s as well as the addressee’s face. The only difference between orthophemism and euphemism is that the former is typically more formal and more direct (literal) than euphemism, whereas the latter is typically more colloquial and figurative than orthophemism. This means that orthophemistic expressions (straight-talking) are neither sweet-talking, or overtly polite, nor harsh or offensive.

Unlike euphemism, dysphemism refers to the use of an offensive or harsh word or expression instead of a sweet one. Summing up, Allan – Burridge (2006: 34) explain that language expression could be preferred or dispreferred. The preferred language expression could be orthophemism such as faeces which is more formal and more direct or euphemism such as poo which is more colloquial and more figurative. The dispreferred is termed dysphemism such as shit. Classifying colours in terms of “X-phemisms” necessitates discussing the metaphorical uses of colours. In relation to this, Allan (2009: 626) says that colour-based metaphors (and metonymies) are a subclass of appearance-based metaphors, in

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that colours are associated with certain perceivable objects (Davidoff 1997; Allan 2001: 306). Additional examples of all three types of “X-phemisms” are *pass away* (typically a euphemism), *snuff it* (typically a dysphemism), and *die* (typically an orthophemism).

Following Allan (2009), I classify the connotations of Arabic colour terms, exploring their euphemistic and dysphemistic connotations, with the discussion being geared to the colour-based metaphors (and metonyms) that are common in Jordanian Arabic, though occasional but unsystematic examples of colour-based metaphors existing in other languages are discussed. The study shows, in agreement with Allan (2009: 627), that dysphemistic connotations of colours are more common than euphemistic ones, besides the fact that the orthophemistic connotations of Arabic colours surveyed are infinite. The colours investigated in this study are *black*, *white*, *yellow*, *red*, *green* and *blue*, the most connotationally important primary colour terms in Arabic and the most widespread colour categories across languages. They are more universal than the colour terms in the later stages of the Berlin – Kay’s (1969) model, such as *brown*, *purple*, *pink*, *orange* or *grey*.

3. Data collection

The data for this study were obtained primarily from newspapers, TV-series, books and from the *Dictionary of Colours and Names Associated with Them*. I also aimed to informally ask colleagues, students, friends and relatives whom I know very well in informal settings about the common connotative meanings of colour terms and the words that colour names normally collocate with. I also asked them about their evaluation of the extended meanings of colour terms, as being positive or negative.

The adoption of face-to-face conversational interviews as a qualitative research method is beneficial when compared to the method of questionnaires, as it provides data that exactly describe the informants’ conception of their behaviour and of social reality in general. Compared to structured interviews, the open-ended interview – or “ethnographic interview” in Puch’s (2005: 172) terms – is viewed as being more flexible and thus more reliable in the provision of valid responses about the informants’ perceptions of their experiences and reality. Burns (2000: 425) emphasises the significance of this type of interviewing, saying that it enables the interviewer to spend a great portion of time with the interviewee, and this of course entails high response rates. Furthermore, answers to questions will be provided from the interviewee’s point of view and not shaped and affected by the interviewer’s perspective. The absence of specific questions means that informants use natural language rather than trying to find specific lexis and expressions which they think would be regarded as an appropriate answer. In support of this argument, Gomm (2004: 220) points out that some researchers view this approach to interviews to be naturalistic on the ground that these interviews are similar to conversations or chats, and that the relationship that holds the interviewer and the interviewee is almost built on a friendship basis.

In a completely informal style and in a stress-free environment, the interviewer started by asking each respondent about his/her evaluation of the secondary meanings of colour terms under study as being positive or negative. The interviewer then moved to the second part of the interview which was aimed at getting the respondents’ justification for their positive or negative evaluations of the secondary meanings of colour terms. Respondents
justified their evaluation using common Jordanian idiomatic expressions that include colour terms. The colours examined in this study were selected on the basis of being the most common and frequently used colours in Arabic. The data collection activity took place in my office (4 colleagues and 5 students) at the Department of English Language and Literature at Al-Hussein Bin Talal University and in my house (5 friends and 6 relatives).

As for newspapers, I detected the use of colour terms in three electronic Jordanian newspapers, namely Ammonnews, Sarayanews, and Assawsana for two reasons: First, to enrich my understanding of the multiple connotative meanings of Arabic colour terms. Second, to check if there is matching between the answers received in the informal interviews and those from the electronic newspapers in terms of the evaluation of the connotative meanings of colour terms as being positive or negative. As mentioned in Section 1, this study is concerned with examining the culturally decided connotations, and not the associations that seem to rely on individuals’ previous knowledge. The present study is assumed to examine the established and conventional connotations of the basic Arabic terms (colour idioms) that all people are assumed to know. With this in mind, it is not extremely significant to include in this study the contextualized uses of colour terms. Decontextualised uses of Arabic colour terms are likely to provide an informative picture of the positive and negative extended meanings of colour terms. Though dictionaries are less likely to faithfully and completely reflect any language system, it is nevertheless reasonable to use such source of data, plus the informal interviews and newspapers, to capture an overall understanding of the positive and negative connotative meanings of Arabic colour terms.

4. Discussion

In this section, I discuss the X-phemistic uses of Arabic colour terms (black, white, yellow, red, green, and blue). As mentioned in Section 2, this study is designed to exploring the Arabic colour-based metaphors (and metonyms) with especial reference to Jordanian Arabic.

4.1 Black

In Arabic, black could be used dysphemistically, euphemistically, and orthophemistically. When used dysphemistically, black is nearly always associated with mischievous, soiled, and evil issues. Therefore, a black plot (xtaḥ sawda?) is a secret plan to accomplish hostile, unlawful, or evil purpose; black-handed (aswad alyadayn) could be used to signify a person with unclean or dirty hands; and the expression black-deeds (ašīmal sawda?) may signify deceit, malice, and evil. Also, a black mark in one’s record (šalamah sawda? fi ṣāf̣at almr?) is used to represent things that have a negative impact; black magic (assihir al-aswad) could be used to describe the unseen and demonic magic; and black spite (hiqid aswad) connotes a high degree of hostility, frowning, and outrage. Dysphemistic uses of black seem to be more common than euphemistic and even more common than orthophemistic ones. That said, black luck (haḍṛ aswad) is often associated with bad luck, and a black-hearted (aswad

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2 See appendix for phonetic symbols.
al-galb) person is a one who is full of hatred. If someone is described as having a black day (yawm aswad), this may mean that one is having a bad end. Also, black frost (asʻaqeeș al-aswad) is associated with a severe freezing that results in the internal freezing and death of vegetation, and black list (alqaʻimah assawda?) symbolizes a list of banned and dangerous issues and people. Perceived negatively, the black-livered (aswad al-kabid) was used by ancient Arabs to describe enemies of strong hostility. These examples could substantiate, as mentioned in Section 1, the negative value of black in the cultural context of Jordan.

Realizing the negative connotations of black, some people strategically avoid the mentioning of black. In Egyptian Arabic, for instance, the word black could be phonetically modified to the extent it is no longer recognised as black. So, instead of (yanhar iswid!), what a black day! Egyptians are more likely to say (yanhar iswiḥ). Alternatively, Egyptians are also more inclined to replace black by white, and this seems to be clear when saying what a white day! (yanhar abyad?), or what white news! (ya xabar abyad?) in reaction to bad and black news. Such lexical replacement is mostly enhanced by the need of being polite while addressing others. That is, people are aware of the need to protect the addressee’s as well as the speaker’s face.

Worldwide, black has negative connotations, and in many languages it is directly related to depression, pessimism or anger (Soriano – Valenzuela 2009: 422). It is associated in all nations, with the exception of Mexico, with fear (Hupka et al. 1997: 166). Oyama et al. (1963) report in their study that Japanese subjects connected red with anger and black with fear. Black which symbolizes death, deceit, fear, hatred (Jobes 1962) is also evaluated as protective (Adams – Osgood 1973; Murray – Deabler 1957; Schaie 1961; Wexner 1954), and as an impetus for aggressive behaviour (Frank – Gilovich 1988). Black is associated in western communities with funereal clothes and other matters pertaining to death (Allan 2009: 627). All these reinforce the dysphemistic uses of black.

It is worth noting that, like red and white, when black appears in dual form in Arabic, it is interpreted as referring to precisely two of the entities. The dual black could have either euphemistic or dysphemistic connotations, in that al-aswadan = the two blacks (nominative case) signifies date and water, whereas al-aswadayin = the two blacks (accusative case) is another way to mention snake and scorpion. In relation to this, two points need to be clarified. First, water is not black in colour, yet because it is used in combination with date which is mostly black, both date and water are called the two blacks. This is to propose that date and water are irreversible coordinates in that water and date is rarely used. The foregrounding of date is not without reason. That said, date collocates with water only but water could collocate with many words other than date. Second, whereas al-aswadan = the two blacks (nominative case) is used euphemistically to symbolise date and water, al-aswadayin = the two blacks (accusative case) is used dysphemistically to signify snake and scorpion. Euphemistic uses of black in Arabic include the black hair and black eyes of women, which are considered as signs of the beauty of women.

4.2 White

White, which symbolizes mourning or death in East Asia (Paul – Okan 2010: 950), is viewed positively in Arabic as it is mostly associated with purity and innocent, harmless,
and evil-free issues. Seen in this light, white-hearted (abyadُ al-galb) symbolizes a person who has a white heart (pure heart); a person who is honest, good natured, and very giving of his/herself. If someone has been told s/he has a white heart, then it is a great compliment. Similarly, the white line (al-xatُ al-abyadُ) is used orthophemistically to indicate the appearance of day light and fading of the black light.

A white-record (sُ afhatuhu baydُ) person is often used to describe a person who has a good reputation, and a white lie (kiðbih baydُ) is an acceptable and harmless lie. Also, a white flag (al-rayah al-baydُ) is a symbol of truce and surrender, and could be associated with the white dove (al-hamamah al-baydُ) which is a symbol of peace. In Egypt, people are likely to greet one another using have a white day! (naharak abyadُ), and this could mirror people’s positive perception of white. In Section 4.1, I pointed to Egyptians’ euphemistic use of white and said that Egyptians are predisposed to replacing black by white, and this is clearly apparent in their saying what a white day! (yanhar abyadُ) or what white news! (ya xabar abyadُ) in reaction to bad and black news. Euphemistic uses of white are more common than their dysphemistic counterparts. In support of this, a white-eyed (sُ einuh beidُ) person is often used euphemistically in Jordanian Arabic to politely describe someone who lost sight. The whiteness of eyes is indicative of sight loss. That said, may Allah whiten your face excluding eyes (bayyadُ allah wiʤ hak ěʃa ěʕunak) could be used as a conventional expression in colloquial Jordanian Arabic to thank someone who has helped you get out of a difficult problem. However, in colloquial Jordanian Arabic and in some southern parts of Jordan, a white-eyed (sُ einha beidُ) woman could be dysphemistically used to describe a female who is rude and disrespectful of others and a one who has a strong personality more than is required. A white land (al-ardُ al-baydُ) symbolizes the unplanted land, whereas a black land (al-ardُ al-sawdaُ) refers to the planted land. This is because ancient Arabs used to perceive and call everything relevant to vegetation black.

In Arabic, a white-handed (ðu al-ayadi al-baydُ) person is associated with a philanthropist who has altruistic concern for human welfare and advancement, usually represented by donations of money, property, or work to needy people and to socially useful purposes. White revolution (aððawrah al-baydُ) signifies a peaceful, bloodless political coup that achieves targets without resorting to the use of violence. However, if violence is used, the revolution is called a red revolution (aθθawrah al-hamraُ). This opposition indeed seems to be consistent with that between white terror and red terror, in that “[…] red has the connotation of revolution and white that of reaction, as the fixed collocation White terror shows” (Crisp – Chang 1987: 53). In an article published in Ammonnews (an electronic Jordanian newspaper) on the 24th of October, 2010, The Jordanian Minister of Education announced that “we are on the verge of a white revolution in the education sector” and this means, as ratified by what was mentioned in the body of the article, that positive and constructive developments will be in effect and use as a way to uplift education in Jordan. White helmets (al-xawðat al-baydُ) is used to describe a commission whose main target is to provide relief and assistance services to the Palestinian population in Gaza strip. Viewed in this way, white has been used positively.

White gold (aððahab al-baydُ), used orthophemistically, is an alloy of gold and at least one white metal, usually nickel, manganese or palladium. Another orthophemistic use of white is white arms or white weapons (assila ěl-baydُ) which is a common Arabic term
for any non-firearm type weapon used for self-defence or killing, including swords, daggers, spears, batons, and cleavers. These weapons were the basis of arming the troops before the spread of firearms in the 15th and 16th century. Such weapons started to disappear gradually in the eighteenth century and the spear and the sword remained as arms in some units of the cavalry until the beginning of the twentieth century, whereas cleavers and daggers remained the cutting weapons of commando forces and paratroopers.

It seems that the colour white has more euphemistic than dysphemistic associations in Arabic and English. This being the case, white death (al-mawt al-bayd) is euphemistically used to connote sudden death. In English, white death could be used as another name of the great white shark. It might be that white death is used orthophemistically in English to mirror the white colour of sharks, and euphemistically, perhaps, to avoid the mentioning of the voracious and dangerous sharks. The Arabic white death could be contrasted with the black death (al-mawt al-aswad), which is used dysphemistically as a lexical alternative to plague, an epidemic disease that causes high mortality. White plague (atfisfoon al-bayd) has also dysphemistic connotations, as it could be used to describe any epidemic disease, such as tuberculosis and pneumonic cancer, which makes the patients appear pale.

White-faced (al-wadţih al-bayd) and black-faced (al-wadţih al-aswad) are oppositional in that they are often used to represent success or failure to fulfil one’s promise. White and black are the two colours that have the longest history among colour terms in all languages in the world including Chinese (Xing 2009). This is because they are the most contrastive and easily identified colours (Tao 1994; Baxter 1983; Hays et al. 1972). For this reason, white magic is good, black magic is bad (Allan 2009: 628). In relation to this, Philip (2006: 75) says that “while black – the antithesis of light – is linked to activities that take place under the cover of darkness, white is the reflection of light and thus assumes positive connotative values associated with daylight, including clarity, visibility, honesty, and perfection”. However, there is an opposition of red and white in English with regard to the directly opposed connotations of purity-chastity and lurid sexuality; “the connotations of purity and chastity for white have already been noted, that of lurid sexuality for red is shown in fixed collocations such as a red light district” (Crisp – Chang 1987: 53).

In Saudi Arabia, there are many proverbs that highlight the significance and positive meaning of white. As a result, in not all appeared white is a back of camel (Ma kal abayd dţahir dålool), a white-backed camel is used as a metonymy for a fat camel. In other words, the back of camel turns white due to camel carrying many loads and due to being overridden. The pragmatic implicature of this Arabic metonymy is that not every fat animal is fit for carrying heavy loads and for riding in much the same way camels are. The proverb he cut it and the place of cutting is white (qassaha waid maqassuha abayd) is a metonymy for the high cutting speed. If a limb of the body is quickly cut, then the cutting place appears white, as blood hasn’t gushed yet. If slowly cut, the cutting place appears red as blood will have rushed out already. As outlined in Section 1, white is almost viewed positively in the Jordanian context, and the same perception of this colour could be true in the whole Arab world.

4.3 Yellow

Yellow, in line with Allan (2009: 630), is less likely to be used euphemistically. “Yellow is nearly always orthophemistic, but occasionally dysphemistic”. In Jordanian Arabic, yellow
is likely to be viewed overwhelmingly negative. That said, as yellow as lemon (asťfar kasťfar allaymoon) could be used in Arabic to describe people who are fearful or diseased. Yellow-eyed (ṣuyounuh șufur) and yellow-skinned (djilduh asťfar) are used metonymically to stand for people with liver disease; people who are jaundiced. A yellow leaf (waraqatuh șafra) person may be used to describe an elderly person who, due to illness, is expected to die soon. This is because when leaves turn yellow in autumn, they start to fall off the trees, and yellowness is seen in this context as an indication of the end of their life cycle. Yellow air (al-hawa? al-şafra?) is used to connote cholera, whereas the yellow wind (arreeh al-şafra?) is a book by David Grossman who describes the conflict between the Jews and Arabs in Palestine. Yellow pens (al-aqlam al-şufur) refer to pens whose owners’ main aim is to fulfill personal interests in their writings at the expense of others’. Summing up, the connotations of yellow seem to be predominantly dysphemistic.

Yellow represents warmth in the USA, but infidelity in France. It is associated with jealousy in Russia, but pleasant, happy, good taste, royalty in China (Paul – Okan 2010: 953). Examining the patterns of connotation in Chinese and English colour terms, Crisp – Chang (1987: 57) report that though the predominant connotations of yellow and huang (yellow) are both attitudinally negative, their contents are different. That is, whereas yellow is associated with cowardice, huang refers metonymically to pornography. They state that other connotations of huang such as nobility, reverence, honor and maturity are positive. Allan (2009: 630) contends that it is very actively dysphemistic and insulting to call someone yellow or yellow-bellied “cowardly and craven”. Likewise, Soriano – Valenzuela (2009: 422) report that yellow which is associated with cowardice in English is associated with envy in German (Gelb vor Neid sein, “to be yellow with envy”). Additional nations that associate yellow with envy are Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, and Turkey (Osgood et al. 1975: 327).

In an article published in the Jordanian electronic newspaper Ammonnews on the 25th of June 2011 under the ironic heading of “Towards a yellow Jordan” it was reported that dozens of environmental activists opposed and protested the government’s intention to cut down the trees of Bargash4 forest in order to build a new college. Protesters used slogans denouncing the government’s decision and demonstrated that the execution of the green spots in the kingdom is likely to turn Jordan into yellow areas. This and other examples could substantiate the negative symbolic value of yellow in the Jordanian context.

4.4 Red

In addition to its orthophemistic uses, red could be used both euphemistically and dysphemistically. However, negative connotations seem to be more common than their positive counterparts. Red is associated with dangers and hardships. So, when a player receives a red card (al-bitâqah al-hamra?) in a game, it means expulsion from the game. In Arabic, the perception of red by the two sexes could be different, in that red clothing (al-malabis al-hamra?) may be sought after by women and rejected by men. In Arabic, red death could be negatively associated with something that is too bad. A possible interpretation is that because one could be blinded by horror and anger, one could see the world red in one’s eyes. Red death could also be used to describe any extremely painful disease such as renal

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4 Bargash is a forest located in the city of Ajloun in Jordan.
colic, murdering death, hard death, or any hardship one might be in. Anger is associated with red in many languages, where one can find expressions such as the French rouge de rage ("red with anger"), though in Thai, a "body turning green" belongs to an angry person (Soriano – Valenzuela 2009: 422). In Zulu, the angry heart is said to be red (Taylor – Mbense 1998: 202–3). By the same token, Japanese connect red with anger and jealousy (Oyama et al. 1963). Seen as a colour of doubt and suspicion, red is dysphemistically extended in Saudi Arabia to describe suspected people. So, when one is described as having red hair (faṣrūṭ hamra), this connotes a person who is always unjustly accused, always suspected, always less trusted, and always blamed upon. The story of this common Arabic metonymy could be explained as when the hair is red in colour, anyone might doubt that and think that the hair is not really red but dyed red. When someone is described as red-faced (wadghuḥu aḥmar), this could mean that one is embarrassed or shameful. The face turns red when blood involuntarily rushes to the face in an extraordinary response to embarrassment or shame. Redness of face in this context should be distinguished from that caused by anger and illness.

In Arabic, to show someone a red eye (fardžah el-ʕein el-hamra) is to warn and threaten him. Spending a red night (amdחי a laylah hamra?) or a red evening (sahrah hamra?) is an expression that is always associated with a pornographic night or evening. By the same token, red wax seal (jamiʕ ahmar) has dysphemistic connotation, in that it is often understood as a mark of the closure of law-violating shops, institutions, etc. However, red is positively used in The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in that this humanitarian movement was founded to protect human life and health and to assuage the human suffering, without any discrimination based on nationality, race, sex, religious beliefs, class or political opinions.

Worldwide, red means unlucky in Nigeria and Germany, but lucky in China, Denmark and Argentina. It represents ambition and desire in India and love in China, Korea and Japan (Paul – Okan 2010: 953). Philip (2006: 80) says that as part of the metonymically-motivated meanings associated with red is found in finance, where credits are notated in black ink, and debits in red. The expressions in(to) the red and out of the red / into the black serve to differentiate and highlight the contrasting sides of the account. Though the previous examples highlight the negative and dysphemistic uses of red, the same colour has many euphemistic uses in many languages. This being the case, red could serve as the colour of authority, importance and royalty and this is represented by rolling out the red carpet for someone to give him/her a [right] royal welcome (Philip 2006: 80). Moreover, euphemisms for menstruation use figures such as the Red Sea’s in, it’s a red letter day, riding the red rag, flying the red flag, surfing the red wave, red sails in the sunset, snatch box decorated with red roses, and her cherry is in sherry (Allan 2009: 632).

Ancient Arabs also used red to connote positive and negative meanings. This being the case, the two reds (al-ahmaran) could stand for gold and saffron, bread and meat, or bread and wine. A red afternoon (hamra? al-ʔaheerah) is often associated with a very hot afternoon. If someone is called red then he might be unarmed. It is also insulting and dysphemistic to call someone red nowadays. For ancient Arabs, red was sometimes used to signify white and was used to describe non-Arabs, whereas black is used to describe Arabs. Because Arabs tend to be brown in colour they are called black, and because non-Arabs tend to be white, they are described red, bearing in mind, as said, that what was white was
called red. Red camels (humur al-niṣam) are really white camels. If red was perceived white by ancient Arabs, then what was the colour white used for? Indeed, it was used to indicate anything pure and free from defects.

4.5 Green

Though green symbolizes danger or disease in Malaysia (Paul – Okan 2010: 953) and envy in Spanish (Soriano – Valenzuela 2009: 422) and in the United States (Hupka 1997: 167), it could be seen, in agreement with Allan (2009: 633), as the most restful colour, as it symbolizes different positive concepts such as growth, harmony, health, and safety. In Arabic, a green-toothed (axḍar annawadixo) person could be used to describe a healthy person who constantly eats spring onion and leek. A green light (adḍuḍar? al-axḍar) is viewed as the mark of safety and permission to pass through something and walk. Though green apples, pears and peaches, said Allan, are unripe and thus unpalatable, green fish (samak axḍar) could be used positively in the Jordanian context to symbolize fresh fish. Green-handed (al-ayadi al-xadra?) seems to be positively used to describe a successful gardener; everything he/she plants in the ground grows well. The connection between green and plant life is also used in English and present in the expression to have green fingers (Philip 2006: 83).

There are many positive connotations of green. The Green Revolution (aθθawrah al-xadra?) is a term used to describe the international efforts to increase food production in developing countries. This indeed demonstrates the positive use of green in this context. Greenpeace (assalam al-axḍar) is a non-governmental environmental organization that is aimed at changing the industrial and governmental policies that threaten the natural world. It draws attention to the dangers – global warming, deforestation, overfishing, commercial whaling and anti-nuclear issues – that threaten the environment. Without recourse to the use of force, members of greenpeace use the means of direct nonviolent protest. Green vehicles (assayarat al-xadra?) or environmentally friendly vehicles are hybrid electric vehicles that are powered by alternative fuels. Green power (atṭaqah al-xadra?) represents the renewable energy resources and technologies that are environmentally friendly. In an article published in Ammonnews on the 11th of September 2009 under the heading of the green Jordanian Petroleum: Jordanians are preparing to reap the fruits of 17 million olive trees, green petroleum is positively used to refer metonymically to olive trees. The title is indicative of the fact that Jordan is not an oil-producing country, and this stresses the positive value of the green olive trees as an alternative for oil.

Allan (2009) says that unripe fruit such as apples, pears and peaches is green and thus unpalatable. He also says that the negative features of green have been transferred and extended to dysphemistically describe things and people. When people and things are dysphemistically called green, then they are immature, inexperienced, undeveloped, unripe, and raw. Instances of such negative extension do exist in colloquial Jordanian Arabic, in that a green leaf (waraqatuh xadra) person could be used to describe someone who died in his prime. This is to be contrasted with yellow leaf (waraqatuh sfafra) person, an expression which could be used to describe an elderly person who, as explained in Section 4.3, is expected to die soon. A green wood (ṣuduh axḍar) person symbolizes a boy or a man who is immature or inexperienced. In green clothes (yaseel axḍar) and green mix concrete (tteenih xadra), green is negatively used to stress that clothes and mix concrete are not dry
yet. Also in Jordanian Arabic, a *green-souled* (nifsuh xadfra) man could be used to describe an old and married man who, however old and married, loves the opposite sex and keeps trying to make self, through some patterns of behaviour, younger in the eyes of women. Such line of behaviour is not welcome by people and is a reason to disrespect him. Summing up, the connotations of the colour *green* seem to be dysphemistic when associated with people or things that are immature, inexperienced, or non-dry.

4.6 Blue

*Blue* is the colour of the unclouded sky and sea, and is often associated with highly positive values such as tranquillity and calmness. Light *blue* is a symbol of cleanliness, in that most hospitals are internally painted light *blue*. Filters used to purify water, and cleaning liquids are mostly *blue* in colour. Light *blue* as such is associated with health, healing and tranquillity. Because boys, in comparison with girls, are dressed in *blue*, some propose that *blue* is a masculine colour. In colloquial Jordanian Arabic, metaphorical uses of *blue* seem to be predominantly dysphemistic, in that *blue-blooded* (dammuh azrag) – which symbolizes a person of noble birth in English – could be used as equivalent to *black-hearted* (aswad al-galb). *Someone with blue canine tooth* (nabuh azrag) could stand for a fox-like person who is skillful at deception. When someone’s face is described as turning *blue*, then someone seems to be getting sick, or someone fell unconscious. If someone says the *blue* demons are playing in front of my eyes, then someone could be in a state of extreme anger. A *blue* prison uniform is associated with convicts, and the colour of prison uniform could differ from one country to another. It could be insulting to call someone *blue*, and the colour *blue* was used by ancient Arabs in their prose and poetry to describe an enemy of a high degree of hostility. In relation to this, Al-Hareeree (1900) says:

> What is that better than *green* living and visiting the *yellow* beloved? My *white* day was *blackened*, and my *black* hair was *whitened* and when the *blue* enemy was visible to me, then (I said) how lovely the *red* death is. (Translated by the author)

In the above text, *green living* is used as a metonymy for the state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous. The *yellow beloved* is the diseased sweetheart. The *blackening* of the *white* day is a metonymy for the many worries and hardships. The *whitening* of the black *hair* is another metonymy for old age and weakness. The *blueness* of enemy is a metonymy for the enemy’s high degree of hostility. *Red* death is a metonymy for the severity of the type of death which might include blood shedding.

*Blue* bead (al-xarazaeh azzarga) could be used euphemistically in Jordanian culture as part of the preventive measures against the evil eye which is believed to be a look causing bad luck, and sometimes death, for the person at whom it is directed for reasons of envy or dislike. In Jordanian culture, like the case in some other Arab cultures, babies and young children are thought to be the main victims of the evil eye because they are often praised by strangers and childless men and women. As a preventive measure to avoid the evil eye, some parents in Jordanian culture attach a *blue* bead to the clothes of babies and young children. Though this is a superstitious belief, people keep hanging *blue* beads inside cars, houses, and on babies’ clothes as a way to avoid the envious and ill-wishing looks of others. Seen in this light, *blue* seems to be viewed positively by people.
The story of blue beads dates back to pharaohs who used to believe that gemstones such as blue beads have magical and protective power besides their function as adornments (Aldred 1978). Ancient Egyptians believed in three colours: red, green, and blue; the colours that were prevalent in their jewelry. Red symbolizes the red blood that goes on in the veins and gives life and activity. Green symbolizes the greenery of crops. Blue is linked to the blue sky where the sun (the symbol of the god of ancient Egyptians) swims and where the god, that protects and blesses people, lives. The belief in the magical power of gemstones such as blue beads passed from one generation to generation until it reached today’s world with the people knowing nothing about the origin of that myth.

Though blue bead is used for the prevention of envy, blue-eyed (ʕuyounuh zurug) seems to be always used dysphemistically to connote the worst envious. In Jordanian culture, the common metonymy of “blue-eyed and spaced-teeth” (ʕuyounuh zurug wa snanuh furug) person could describe an enormously envious person. Blue-eyed is currently used to always describe detrimental envious people, and ancient Arabs used blue-eyed to describe enemies of a high degree of hostility. In spite of the positive connotation of blue bead, the uses of blue seem to be predominantly dysphemistic. This finding does not conform to Allan’s (2009), in that the uses of blue are found to be rarely euphemistic in Jordanian Arabic.

5. Conclusion

This study has attempted over the previous sections to investigate the connotative meanings of colour terms, black, white, yellow, red, green and blue in Arabic in general and in Jordanian Arabic in particular. The study, adopting Allan’s (2009) approach, classified the connotations of colour terms in Arabic, positive and negative, in terms of “X-phemisms”; a term which was used in Allan – Burridge (2006) to describe the union set of orthphemisms, dysphemisms, and euphemisms. In Jordanian Arabic, all colors have euphemistic and dysphemistic connotations but while black, yellow, red and blue were found to be predominantly dysphemistic and associated with mostly negative connotations, white is used euphemistically, and mostly has positive connotations, yet green is found to be having both euphemistic and dysphemistic connotations.

Black has dysphemistic connotations more often than yellow, red and blue do, and this is in fact not a specific feature of Jordanian Arabic but it is a thing common to most languages. Allan (2009: 636) points out that in English, “black is used orthphemistically but not euphemistically; it has dysphemistic connotations more often than other colours do”. In Jordanian Arabic, black could be linked to mischievous, soiled, and evil issues. It could also be associated with unseen and demonic magic, bad luck, bad end, enemies with strong hostility. Euphemistic associations of black seem to be relatively few and only three examples were found to be examples of positive connotations: black-eyed, black-haired, and the two blacks (nominative case) as signifying date and water. It could be said that the above expressions are culture-specific in that they are unique to Arabic language in general and Jordanian Arabic in particular.

White mostly has positive connotations and is often used euphemistically. It is positively associated with purity and innocent, harmless, and evil-free issues. White-hearted, white flag, white dove, white revolution and white helmets are all examples of positive associations.
White seems to be rarely used dysphemistically in Jordanian Arabic, as is clear in a white-eyed woman; an expression which could be used to describe a rude woman who has a strong personality more than is required, and a white land which is used to describe the unplanted land. These findings seem to be in line with Allan’s (2009), in that white is found to be linked to light and purity, and it mostly has positive connotations in English.

In contrast to white, yellow is rarely used euphemistically. This being the case, yellow-eyed and yellow-skinned which could be used to describe people who are jaundiced, a yellow leaf person which could be used as a way to describe an elderly person who is expected to die soon, and yellow air which is often used to connote cholera are all examples of dysphemistic uses of yellow. In English, yellow is nearly always orthophemistic but occasionally dysphemistic. “Yellow is dysphemistically used of cowards and cheap paper, and sometimes of East Asiatic people; but it is orthophemistic and positively used of light-coloured African Americans” (Allan 2009: 636).

Negative connotations of red seem to be predominant, in that red card means expulsion from the game, and red death is negatively associated with something that is too bad, and could be used dysphemistically as a lexical alternative to any extremely painful disease such as renal colic. Red hair stands for unjustly accused person. Red afternoon could be used dysphemistically to represent a very hot afternoon. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the only occurrence of red in positive figurative expression. These findings seem to conform to that of Allan (2009: 631) in that in English red has more dysphemistic than euphemistic associations. Instances of dysphemistic association of red in English include Red Indians, to be in the red, red tape, red herring, etc.

The uses of blue seem to be also predominantly dysphemistic; blue-blooded which could be used to dysphemistically describe someone who dislikes others, someone with blue canine tooth which could be used to describe someone who is skilled at deception, and blue demons as uttered by person who could be in a state of extreme anger are all instances of dysphemistic uses of blue. It would be also dysphemistic and insulting to call someone blue. The only positive connotation of blue occurs in the blue bead which is used as a preventive method against evil eye. Unlike the case in Arabic, the uses of blue are rarely dysphemistic in English and in relation to this, Allan (2009: 636) says:

As the colour of the Madonna’s robe, blue is connected with the virtuousness and chastity of a bride. The negative aspects of figurative uses of blue arise from fear, fighting, despodency, and tabooed language and behaviour. It is arguable that the use of blue to speak about these topics is euphemistic and that uses of blue are rarely dysphemistic.

Green symbolizes different positive connotations such as growth, harmony, health, and safety. Green-toothed, green-handed, Green Revolution, green peace, green vehicles, and green power are all examples of positive associations of green. However, green leaf person, someone who died in his prime; green-wood person, someone who is immature or inexperienced; and green-souled as used to describe an old and married man who loves the opposite sex and who likes to appear younger in the eyes of women are all examples of dysphemistic uses of green. In English green is linked to living vegetation, and negative connotations arise when it is the colour of illness or jealousy (Allan 2009).
Appendix: Phonetic Symbols used in the study

b: Voiced bilabial plosive  tf: Voiceless postalveolar affricate
m: Bilabial nasal  l: Postalveolar lateral approximant
f: Voiceless labiodental fricative  j: Palatal approximant
d: Voiced dental plosive  g: Voiced velar plosive
t: Voiceless dental plosive  k: Voiceless velar plosive
n: Dental nasal  y: Voiced velar fricative
ð: Voiced postalveolar affricate

Pharyngealised consonants are marked with ꟪: tf, d, s, ð, l. (Adopted from Suleiman 1985: 30)

References


