

## A CONTRASTIVE SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF COLOUR ADJECTIVES IN POLISH AND ENGLISH

STANISLAW DUCZMAL

*University of Łódź*

1. The lack of isomorphism between the lexical systems in the vocabularies of different languages is already a well recognized and accepted fact which has found its manifestation in the fundamental law of semantics referring to the divergency between substance and form or between content and expression planes. Thus languages are referred to as non-isomorphic by imposing a specific form on the a priori universal and undifferentiated substance (cf. Lyons 1969).

2. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to define the degree of the above mentioned isomorphism by means of comparing the semantic fields of colour adjectives used metaphorically in Polish and English, mainly in their attributive function in the adjective+noun sequence or in set phrases. We shall consider, therefore, the following structures:

- a) adj.+N, for instance: *white collar*
- b) V+adj., „ „ *to feel blue*
- c) compounds, „ „ *blacksmith*

3. For our purpose in this paper, the definition of semantic field will be a group of words subsumed under one colour term and fulfilling the above mentioned conditions. The discussion will be based on juxtaposing each Polish example with its English translation (equivalent) respectively as given in the dictionaries (see references). Archaic and rarely used entries will not be discussed.

4. Such an approach is expected to reveal interesting and important facts about the degree of isomorphism between the two languages in question as far as the colour terms are concerned and consequently it may provide some

insights for the error analysis, native language interference and all the aspects that the pedagogical grammar deals with.

5. Even casual observation indicates that an understanding of colour involves not only physics but language communication as well. When analysing the occurrence of colour adjectives one is immediately aware of the fact that they form either restricted or unrestricted classes according to the given noun they modify. Thus, a *pen* may be modified either as *black*, *blue*, *red*, *green* etc. while *ingratitude* is usually referred to as *black*. Moreover, we speak of *wine* or *hair* as *red* which in fact is *brownish* or *rusty*. We may, therefore, distinguish two classes of colour reference: basic i.e. unrestricted and peripheral i.e. restricted or metaphorical. The first exhibits one-to-one correspondence while the other one differs to a more or less considerable extent.

6. It has also been demonstrated that there are languages which use different colour terms for a definite range of colour in the spectrum (cf. Lyons 1969). Some of the languages use more than one term while others lack one. Such a divergency is due to the culture which the language represents and consequently reflects in language communication. The degree of cultural overlap bears, therefore, on the range of differences.

7. On the whole English and Polish do not differ radically in their naming of physical colours. This can be very easily observed when comparing the definitions of colour entries given in the respective dictionaries, for example:

- biały — of the colour opposite to black, characteristic of snow.
- white — of the colour of fresh snow, or common salt.
- niebieski — of the colour of clear sky, the flowers of flax.
- blue — colour like the sky on a clear day, or the deep sea when the sun is shining.
- zielony — of the colour between blue and yellow... the colour of fresh grass.
- green — of the colour between blue and yellow... the colour of growing grass... etc., etc.

As follows from the above presentation the principal colour adjectives in Polish and English possess a similar reference when in their basic meaning. The only exception is *blue* which, like the Russian *sinyi*, *goluboi*, has two counterparts; *niebieski*, *blekitny* in Polish. It still remains to be mentioned that colours in physics used to be classified into: primary (red, yellow, blue), secondary (orange, green, violet) that is the combination of primary colours, and tertiary, that is the combination of secondary. For our purpose, however, we shall restrict ourselves to the most frequently used colour adjectives in language communication, namely: *white*, *black*, *red*, *green*, *blue*, *yellow*, *grey*, *pink* and *brown*.

8. The correspondence between colour adjectives in English and Polish may be demonstrated as follows:

A. Full isomorphism: close one-to-one correspondence, i.e.

*biale wino*—white wine

B. Partial isomorphism:

1) where the noun remains identical while the adjective differs:

*biale tango* — ladies' tango

2) where the adjective remains identical while the noun differs:

*biała figura* — white chessman

C. Lack of isomorphism.

1) different equivalents:

*białe szaleństwo* — skiing

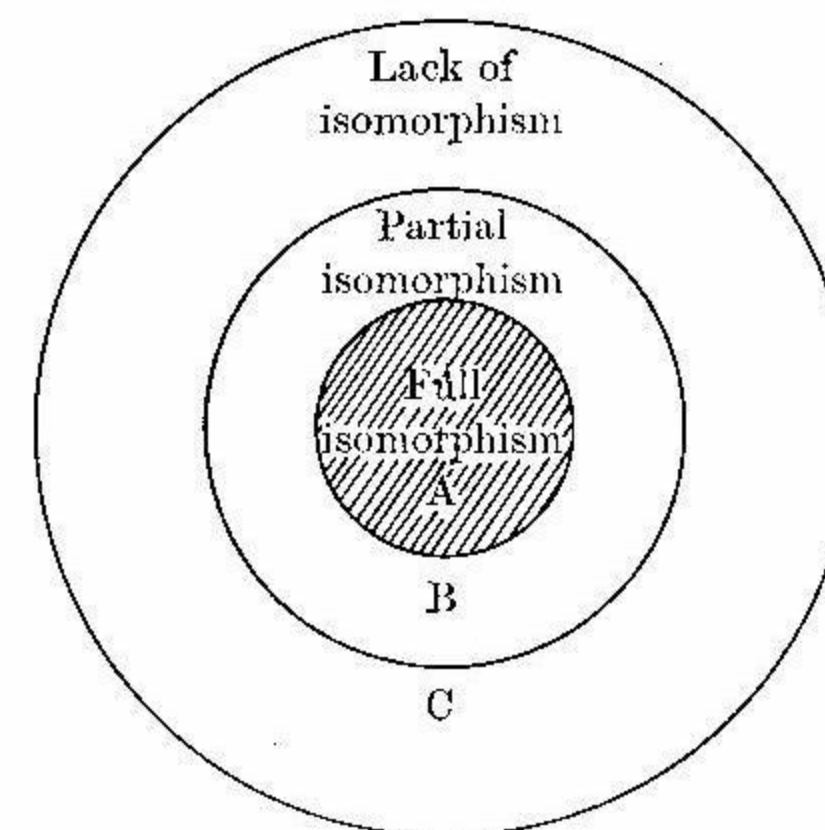
2) descriptive translation:

*biały mazur* — mazurka danced at dawn

3) reverse equivalents (rare)

*biały kruk* — black swan

The above range of isomorphism may be represented graphically. It is supposed to account for the degree of difficulty in foreign language vocabulary acquisition. The learner is likely to meet more difficulties in memorizing lexical units located far away from the kernel of the diagram:



In our discussion the semantic fields B and C will be combined together as non-isomorphic. Thus we shall introduce a double subdivision only: full- and non-isomorphic.



A. BIAŁY — WHITE

1. biały kruk	— black swan
2. biały wiersz	— blank verse
3. biały mazur	— (descriptive)
4. biały świt	— dawn
5. biała pleć	— women
6. białe szaleństwo	— skiing
7. biały murzyn	— drudge
8. biała karta	— a clean sheet
9. białe noce	— polar nights
10. biały dzień	— high day
11. biała broń	— side arms
12. biała blacha	— tinned sheet
13. biały mróz	— hoar-frost
14. białe tango	— ladies' tango
15. biała księga	— white paper
16. biała figura	— white chessman

17. biała kawa	1. — white coffee
18. białe mięso	2. — white meat
19. białe pieczywo	3. — white bread
20. białe wino	4. — white wine
21. białe ciałka krwi	5. — white corpuscles of blood
22. biała substancja mózgu	6. — white matter in brain
23. Biały Orzeł	7. — White Eagle
24. Biały Dom	8. — White House
25. biały metal	9. — white metal
26. białe karły	10. — white dwarfs
27. biała magia	11. — white magic
28. biały cukier	12. — white sugar
29. biała gorączka	13. — white fever
30. biała niewolnica	14. — white slave
31. biały niedźwiedź	15. — white bear
32. biały człowiek	16. — white man

17. — white hot	— rozpalony do gorąca
18. — white sale	— wyprzedaż płócien
19. — white bait	— smażone rybki
20. — white caps	— grzywiaste fale
21. — white collar	— urzędnik
22. — white livered	— tchórzliwy
23. — white lipped	— z wargami sinymi ze strachu
24. — whitesmith	— blacharz
25. — white washer	— obrońca reputacji
26. — white lie	— nieszkodliwe kłamstwo
27. — white sheet	— szata pokutnika
28. — white tie	— (descriptive)
29. — white slavery	— prostytutka
30. — white slave traffic	— handel żywym towarem

B. CZARNY — BLACK

1. czarny człowiek	— darked-skinned man
2. czarna dusza	— wicked soul
3. czarny charakter	— mischief-maker
4. czarna godzina	— rainy day
5. czarna strona	— dark side of
6. czarna robota	— dirty work
7. czarny kontynent	— The Dark Continent
8. czarna polewka	— (descriptive)
9. czarny chleb	— brown bread
10. czarny towar	— black ivory

11. czarna kawa	1. — black coffee
12. czarna jagoda	2. — blackberry
13. czarna porzeczka	3. — blackcurrant
14. czarna księga	4. — black book
15. czarna owca	5. — black sheep
16. czarna rozpacz	6. — black despair
17. czarny postęp	7. — black deed
18. czarna nienawiść	8. — black ingratitude
19. czarna śmierć	9. — black death
20. czarny rynek	10. — black market
21. czarna reakcja	11. — black reactionary
22. czarna magia	12. — black magic
23. czarna msza	13. — black mass
24. Czarna Pantera	14. — Black Panther
25. Czarna Siła	15. — Black Power
26. Czarne Koszule	16. — Black Shirts
27. czarny strach	17. — black fear
28. Czarne Zagłębie	18. — Black Country
29. czarna komedia	19. — black comedy

20. — black lead	— grafit
21. — black leg	— lamistrajk
22. — black mail	— szantaż
23. — black Maria	— suka
24. — black pudding	— kiszka
25. — blackout	— zaciemnienie
26. — blacksmith	— kowal
27. — black spot	— (descriptive)
28. — black mood	— ponury nastrój
29. — black beetle	— karaluch
30. — blackboard	— tablica
31. — black box	— (descriptive)
32. — black coated	— urzędnik
33. — black frost	— suchy mróz
34. — blackbird	— kos
35. — blackcock	— cietrzew
36. — black jack	— maczuga
37. — black letter	— pismo gotyckie
38. — blackguard	— szubrawiec
39. — black water fever	— malaria
40. — black friar	— dominikanin
41. — blackhead	— wagr

1. czerwony kur	— (descriptive)	
2. czerwony złoty	— (descriptive)	
3. czerwony barszcz	— (descriptive)	
4. Czerwony Krzyż	1. — Red Cross	
5. Czerwony Sztandar	2. — Red Flag	
6. Czerwona Armia	3. — Red Army	
7. Czerwony Półksiężyc	4. — Red Crescent	
8. Czerwona Gwiazda	5. — Red Star	
9. czerwone wino	6. — red wine	
10. czerwone ciałka krwi	7. — red corpuscles of blood	
11. czerwona płachta	8. — red rag	
12. czerwony żar	9. — red heat	
13. czerwone oczy (od płaczu)	10. — red eyes (with weeping)	
	11. — red hands	— zakrwawionymi
	(-with)	rękoma
	12. — red carpet	— (descriptive)
	13. — so red	— wściekać się
	14. — red Brick	— (descriptive)
	15. — red cap	— („ „)
	16. — red ensign	— („ „)
	17. — red book	— („ „)
	18. — red box	— („ „)
	19. — red light district	— („ „)
	20. — red hat	— purpurowy kapelusz
	21. — red hot	— rozpalony, podniecony
	22. — red letter day	— dzień świąteczny
	23. — red meat	— (desc.)
	24. — red tape	— biurokracja
	25. — red weed	— mak
	26. — red herring	— (descriptive)
	27. — red coat	— żołnierz brytyjski
	28. — red blooded	— krzepki

## D. ZIELONY — GREEN

1. Zielone Świątki	— Whit Sunday	
2. zielone pojęcie	— faint idea	
3. zielona granica	— (descriptive)	
4. zielony wybieg	— (descriptive)	
5. zielone łąki	— meadows	
6. zielony karnawał	— (descriptive)	
7. zielony stolik	— gambling table	
8. zielona linia	— (descriptive)	
9. zielona trawka	— get fired	
10. zielony dzięciol	— green poak	
11. zielone toreny	— green belt	
12. zielona herbata	1. — green tea	
13. zielone nawozy	2. — green manure	
14. być zielonym	3. — to be green	
15. zielona pasza	4. — green crop	
16. zielony ze strachu	5. — green with fear	
	6. — green food	— zielonka
	7. — greengrocer	— zieleniarz
	8. — green hide	— surowa skóra
	9. — green old age	— czerstwa starość
	10. — green stuff	— warzywa
	11. — green winter	— bezśnieżna zima
	12. — green Christmas	— B. Narodzenie
	13. — green wound	— niezagojona rana
	14. — green memories	— świeże wspomnienia
	15. — green house	— szklarnia
	16. — greenhorn	— żółtodziób
	17. — green room	— (descriptive)
	18. — greensickness	— blednica
	19. — green sward	— murawa
	20. — green yard	— zagroda
	21. — green eyed	— zazdrosny

## E. NIEBIESKI — BLUE

1. niebieski ptaszek — adventurer			
1. niebieskie migdały — (descriptive)			
3. niebieski lis — arctic fox			
4. niebieska krew	1.	— blue blood	
5. niebieska wstęga	2.	— blue ribbon	
	3.	— blue film	— niecenzuralny film
	4.	— blue jokes	— nieprzyzwoite kawały
	5.	— blue moon (once in a)	— rzadko
	6.	— blue collar	— robotnik
	7.	— blue jacket	— marynarz M. W.
	8.	— blue print	— odbitka
	9.	— blue stocking	— sawantka
	10.	— blue laws	— purytańskie prawa
	11.	— blue water	— otwarte morze
	12.	— feel blue	— mieć chandrę
	13.	— blue fear	— panika
	14.	— blue bonnet	— bławatek
	15.	— blue ointment	— szara maść
	16.	— blue despair	— czarna rozpacz
	17.	— blueberry	— czarna borówka
	18.	— blue in the face	— do utraty tchu
	19.	— drink till all is blue	— upić się do nieprzytomności

## F. RÓŻOWY — PINK / ROSY

1. różowa przyszłość — rosy prospect	
2. różowe nadzieje — „ „	
3. różowy nastrój — in high spirits	
4. różowy humor — „ „	
5. różowe okulary — rose-coloured spectacles	
6. w różowych kolorach (-widzieć)	to take a rosy coloured view
	pink elephant — białe myszki

## G. ŻÓŁTY — YELLOW

1. żółtodziób — green-horn			
2. żółty człowiek	1.	yellow man	
3. żółta rasa	2.	yellow race	
4. żółta febra	3.	yellow fever	
5. żółta plamka	4.	yellow spot (medicine)	
	5.	yellow press	— brukowiec
	6.	yellow bellied	— tchórz
	7.	yellow metal	— mosiądz
	8.	yellow back	— (descriptive)
	9.	yellow boy	— złota moneta
	10.	yellow dog	— szuja
	11.	yellow Jack	— żółta febra

## H. SZARY — GREY

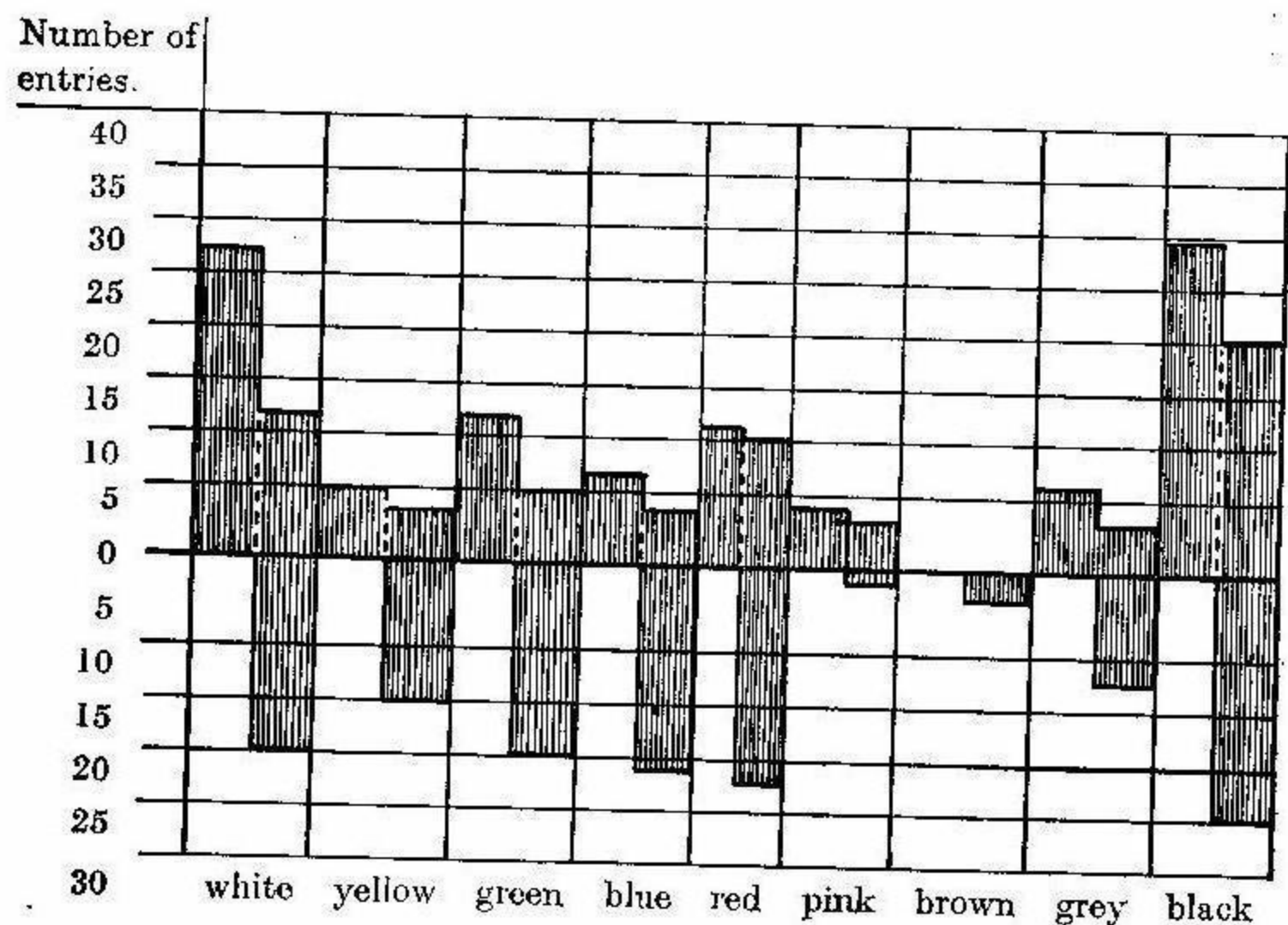
1. szary tłum — the rabble			
2. szara godzina — dusk			
3. szare życie — dull life			
4. szary koniec /być na — bring up the rear			
5. szara eminencja — éminence gris			
6. szary człowiek — plain man			
7. szare płótno — brown linen			
8. szare mydło — soft soap			
9. szary papier — brown paper			
10. szara maść — blue ointment			
11. szara substancja mózgu	1.	grey matter of brain	
12. szara gęś	2.	grey goose	
	3.	grey beard	— starzec
	4.	grey-headed	— weteran
	5.	grey hound	— chart
	6.	grey friar	— franciszkanin
	7.	grey monk	— cysters
	8.	grey sister	— terejarka

## I. BRĄZOWY — BROWN

0	1.		
0	0		
	1.	brown bread	— razowy chleb
	2.	brown paper	— szary papier
	3.	brown sugar	— nieoczyszczony cukier
	4.	to be in a brown study	— zamyślony



Colour adjectives in Polish and English vs. the degree of isomorphism.



#### CONCLUSIONS

1. The above diagram illustrates the degree of isomorphism between colour adjectives in both languages measured by the number of corresponding entries. It is an easily observable fact that the adjectives *white* and *black* possess the highest frequency of occurrence, which seems to support the hypothesis put forward by Berlin and Kay (1970) (see Lehrer 1974: 153) that... "three is a definite hierarchy in importance and in the development of color words. They find that all languages have terms for *white* and *black*. If there is a third term, it will be *red*..."

2. Moreover, the respective semantic fields as presented in our discussion might be characterized in isolation in four categories:

- a) — frequency of occurrence, i.e. the number of entries,
- b) — the dimension of the fully isomorphic field,
- c) — non-isomorphic Polish (semantic field) in relation to English,
- d) — non-isomorphic English (semantic field) in relation to Polish.

Thus, points a) and b) would require no elaborate comment as they are

easily conspicuous, while c) and d) would be made explicit due to such motivation as: a different cultural background, set phrases, idiomatic expressions, associative and connotative features, symbolic meaning, etc.

#### REFERENCES

- Berlin and Kay. 1970. *Basic colour terms*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Butler, D. 1975. *Frazeologia polska dla cudzoziemców*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo UW.
- Doroszewski, W. (ed.). 1958. *Słownik języka polskiego*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Hornby, A. S. 1974. *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Kamienitskaite, N. L. *Sinonimy v anglijskoj frazeologii*. Moskva: Mczdunarodnoe Otnošenija.
- Kobyłański, M. 1965. *Situational English*. Warszawa: PZWS.
- Kunin, A. V. 1967. *Anglo-russkij frazeologičeskij slovar*. Moskva: Sovietskaja Enciklopedia.
- Lehrer, A. 1974. *Semantic fields and lexical structure*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Linguistic Series Publishing Company.
- Lyons, J. 1969. *Introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Stanisławski, J. 1970. *The great Polish-English dictionary*. Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna.
- Stanisławski, J. 1975. *The great English-Polish dictionary*. Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna.