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I Colori nelle Espressioni Idiomatiche Inglese ed Italiane

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this work is to analyse the figurative and metaphorical meanings of colours in English and Italian, focusing on the analysis and comparison of colour idioms in these two languages and cultures. The study starting point is the assumption that language and culture are inextricably related: they influence and modify each other, and both contribute to shaping our world-view.

The first part of the paper (section 2) aims at highlighting the close relation between language and culture. Hence, it focuses on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of language as a filter through which reality is perceived and decoded (1929), and on Berlin and Kay's study (1969) that identifies a connection between culture and colour-spectrum division in language. Cultures attribute figurative meanings to colours, making them culturally bound symbols. Consequently, attention will be given to some examples of the different messages that colours convey in the world.

The metaphorical meaning of colours is dealt with in detail in section 3 where English and Italian colour idioms are presented, compared and contrasted. Each colour is introduced by its figurative meaning in the two cultures. It is also shown whether and how the symbolic meaning is reflected in idiomatic language. The approach to English and Italian idioms is contrastive in order to show cases of direct correspondence (i.e. same colour, same meaning), partial correspondence (i.e. different colour or different idiom but same meaning) and cases peculiar to each language that lack of an idiomatic equivalent in the other language.

The last section recapitulates some of the aspects studied in the previous sections. The example taken from the animated film *The Lion King* shows one of the various cases of difference between the two languages and cultures under examination. In particular, it exemplifies the missing correspondence in blue figurative meaning: a symbol of depression in English and of calmness and religiousness in Italian.

2. Language and culture: Two sides of the same coin

Language and culture are not two distinct entities but two sides of the same coin. They are so inextricably related that the one could not exist without the other. In other words, language shapes culture and culture manifests itself through language.

But what is culture? Culture is “whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society” (Wardhaugh, 2006: 221). It is therefore a shared and widely accepted system of values, beliefs and behaviours for interpreting reality and organizing experience. Or, in Hall's words “culture is the way of life of a people, the sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes, and material things” (Hall, 1973: 20). Accordingly, culture is both the key element that distinguishes one group of people from another and the crucial factor in bonding people together. Culture also contributes to making a group of people a united and unique entity by means of the same “mental programs [or] software of the mind” (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010: 5).

As far as language is concerned, it is not only the manifest element of culture, but it is also and, most importantly, the filter through which reality is perceived, processed and interpreted. The structure of a language, i.e. its grammar and vocabulary, affects how its speakers experience and view the world (Wardhaugh, 2006: 222). The linguist Sapir and his student Whorf have thoroughly studied this function of language as the screen to reality. Their claims constitute the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which suggests that language is “the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity” (Whorf, 1956: 212-14). Hence, speakers of different languages have various world-views since they process reality under the influence of their native tongues' different structures.

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way --- an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (Whorf, 1956: 212-14)

This means that if one language makes a distinction that another does not make, the speakers of that language will be more aware of certain subtleties and will be more used to seeking those nuances in the environment in which they live. For instance, speakers of inflected languages are conscious of gender and number distinctions and this awareness may have consequences for both their cognitive

and cultural development. Likewise, if a language is more accurate than another or has words that the other does not have, the speakers of the first language will find it easier to describe and talk about those concepts (Whorf in Wardhaugh, 2006: 223-25).

Therefore, language and culture are not two distinct notions since they both play a pivotal role in building up our perception of the world. Their close relationship becomes central when dealing with colours and their cultural and figurative meanings.

2.1 Language and colours: How languages divide their colour-spectrum

Colours are part and parcel of humans' perception of the world for two main reasons. First, our world is a word of colour. Second, all human beings with normal vision can perceive them. Hence, colours are omnipresent in every culture and are universally recognized (Philip, 2006: 60).

However, every culture differentiates its colour-spectrum in accordance with the scopes of its language and society. The Navajos, for example, employ the same term to identify both brown and grey and do not distinguish blue from green at all because this difference is not necessary for their communicative needs (Roth, 1996).

Although not all cultures name all colours and although the colour-spectrum division differs from language to language and culture to culture, certain patterns seem to be universally shared. According to Berlin and Kay (1969: 2), all languages make use of 'basic' colour terms. A colour term can be defined as basic if it is a single word such as blue or yellow, it is not combined to any other word as would be the case of light blue or pale yellow, and it is generally used in every day's language such as red.

They found that if a language has only two colour terms, these would be the equivalents to black and white. If a third term were added, this would be red. Green and yellow would come after in no particular order. Then comes blue followed by brown. Finally, it is the turn of grey, pink, orange and purple in no specific order. Therefore, there exists a list of eleven basic colour terms common, up to some extent, to the world's languages and their frequency of occurrence is fixed (Berlin and Kay, *ibid.*: 4).

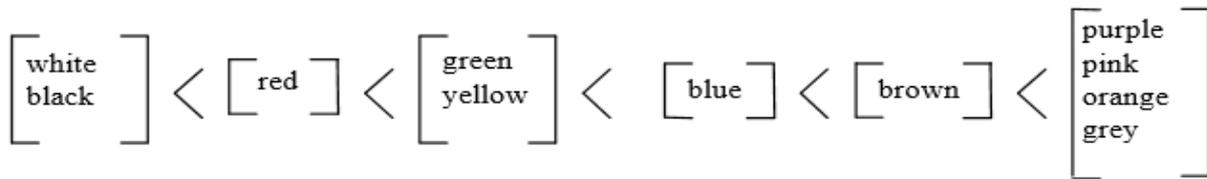


Figure.1 Implicational Hierarchy of basic color terms (Berlin & Kay, 1969: 4)

The researchers also found that the more scientifically and economically developed a society is, the more its colour vocabulary is extended. On the other hand, communities that show little technological development employ fewer colour terms. The Tiv of Nigeria, for example, have three terms, the Hanunóo of the Philippines have four; and the Burmese have seven (Wardhaugh, 2006: 235). As society advances and changes occur, it becomes vital for people to differentiate within the colour-spectrum in order to adapt their language to their new society and to fulfil its new communicative needs (Berlin and Kay in Wardhaugh, 2006: 235-36).

2.2 Culture and colours: colours as culturally bound symbols

Colours are not mere visual phenomena but powerful images capable of conveying meaning and emotions. This communicative aspect of colour is due to the fact that humans have always attached meanings to it, making it a symbol. Every culture has attributed to colour values and connotations, some of which are universally shared while others differ significantly (Adidam & Reizgevičiute, 2005).

In China, for instance, black and red stand for good luck and happiness and consequently these are the colours of wedding cards. In Western countries, those wedding cards would be rejected or judged as bad taste: black being the colour typically associated with mourning, death and emptiness, and red with extreme impulses, passion, violence and anger. Likewise, our traditional white and silver or gold wedding cards would suffer the same faith in China since white symbolises death and it is the traditional colour for mourning. In western societies, on the other hand, white stands for purity and goodness (Morton, www.colormatters.com).

Therefore, the strong communicative impact of colour is not to be neglected in global communication. One field where colour is carefully studied and examined in order to convey

meaning and create assumptions is marketing. Marketers make wise use of colour to “create, maintain and modify brand images in customers' minds” (Madden, Hewett & Roth, 2000: 90). Exploring the meanings associated with colours becomes vital for firms that are to choose their logo or the colour of a packaging since colour determines a product's desirability. When the American brand of toilet cleaner changed the colour of TY-D-Bol's toilet bowl cleanser bottle from light blue and green to white and black sales dropped by 40 % . Blue is the colour associated with water, consequently it conveys the meaning of cleanliness (ibid, 91-92).

The analysis of colours' meanings is even more central if firms aim at exporting a brand across international markets (ibid: 90). In USA, for example, orange denotes either cheapness or value for money, while for the Hindus it is the most sacred colour. Therefore, an orange logo will have a different association in the USA and in India (Adidam & Reizgeviute: 2005). Wagner, the creator of the Wagner Color Research Institute, advised Wienerschnitzel, a hot dog restaurant with 350 locations in the United States, to add orange in their buildings decorations in order to convey the meaning of affordability. After the introduction of orange, the chain reported a 7% increase in sales (Lane, 1991)

The meanings associated with colours are thus culturally bound. Every culture attributes to colours specific symbolic and figurative connotations, as shown by the examples above. The connotative character of colours pertains to every aspects of culture: from its customs and practises to its marketing strategies. However, colour figurative meaning is especially predominant in idiomatic language.

3. Figurative meaning in English and Italian colour idioms

This chapter will focus on the figurative meanings of colours in English and Italian. Each of the eleven basic colours will be analysed in terms of symbolic meaning and of similarities and differences in connotations in the two cultures studied. It will be also highlighted how these culturally bound meanings are reflected in language, namely in English and Italian colour idioms. Idioms will be dealt with in a contrastive approach in order to show both the direct correspondence between English and Italian colour idioms and missing correspondence. Therefore, it will result that for every English idiom there are three possible scenarios in Italian or vice-versa: direct correspondence (same colour and same meaning), partial correspondence (different colour or different idiom but same meaning) and no correspondence, making translation more challenging. The table below exemplifies some of the cases that will be analysed in detail in the following sections.

Table 1: Examples of direct, partial and no correspondence between English and Italian colour idioms

Direct correspondence	Partial correspondence	No correspondence in Italian	No correspondence in English
The black sheep of the family <i>La pecora nera della famiglia</i>	Out of the blue <i>Di punto in bianco</i>	White elephants	<i>Passare una notte in bianco</i>
To roll out the red carpet <i>Stendere il tappeto rosso</i>	To be in the red <i>Essere al verde</i>	To marry into the purple	<i>Un giallo</i>
To have green fingers / to have a green thumb <i>Avere il pollice verde</i>	To catch someone red-handed <i>Prendere con le mani nel sacco</i>	Red in tooth and claw	<i>Cronaca nera / cronaca rosa</i>

3.1 What are idioms?

Idioms encompass the essence of the close relation between language and culture. They are powerful communication tools capable of conveying meaning in a direct and efficacious way providing the addressee with a clear image or feeling, which strikes them and captures their

attention. Additionally, idiomatic expressions are the product of a specific culture, and therefore they are a precious means to explore it.

Given these first two characteristics of idioms, it is plausible to argue that they are language- and culture-specific items. More specifically, idioms are fixed combination of words that originated from dead metaphors (Larson, 1984: 142). Hence, their meaning cannot be literally understood. Baker (1992: 63) defines idioms as “frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and [...] often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components”. Examples of idioms are expressions such as: 'to bury the hatchet', 'to be over a barrel', 'pie in the sky' etc. Baker also points out that in normal communicative circumstances, speakers do not alter or change idioms, namely they do not modify the word order nor do they delete, add or replace a word. Alterations only occur when the speaker or writer aims at making a joke or a play on words.

Accordingly, idioms are established, widely recognized patterns, which use language in a non-literal and metaphorical way (Wright, 1999: 7).

3.2 White

White is the colour traditionally associated with light. Thus, it projects positive values including clarity, visibility, honesty, perfection and cleanliness (Smith, www.sensationalcolor.com). The myth of white as the symbol of purity stems from the Ancient Greece where it was the colour of the Gods. The sacredness of white remains to this day, white being the colour of weddings. White is also the colour of goodness, peace and moral righteousness. These assumptions are also reflected in language, in particular in white-colour idioms. For examples:

'white magic' and *magia bianca* indicating a type of magic performed with the intent of doing good;
'white flag' and *bandiera bianca* indicating a peaceful acceptance of defeat and surrender;
'white Christmas' and *bianco Natale* meaning a magic Christmas covered in snow.

The two languages also present some peculiar idioms, which do not have a direct equivalent or no equivalent at all in the other language. This is the case of the English 'white lie', which does not have an exact Italian *bianco* equivalent. However, there exist an Italian idiom meaning a lie told to be polite and not to upset (Cambridge online dictionary, www.dictionary.cambridge.org), that is *bugia a fin di bene* (lie with good intent). Another example is the Italian *mosca bianca* (white fly).

Since white flies are very rare, the expression stands for something hard to come by and unique. Its English equivalent has no white in, but it is an idiomatic expression: 'hen's teeth'. A bit more problematic is the Italian *settimana bianca* - literally white week, that is to say a holiday in a ski resort - which has no idiomatic English equivalent. Lastly, a worth mentioning idiom is the Italian *dare carta bianca* whose English equivalent is a loan from French: 'to give carte blanche'. They both mean giving complete freedom to someone and allowing them to write their own rules. Philip suggests that the English language employs a French expression since "this meaning does not appear to be connected to the connotative meanings of white" thus French serves to avoid "the possibly inappropriate translation with a colour word" (2006: 76).

However, it is interesting to point out that in Italian white is polysemous and does not exclusively connote virtues. In fact, in some idiomatic expressions, such as *matrimonio in bianco*, *passare una notte in bianco*, and *andare in bianco*, it assumes a negative tone. The apparent positivity of *bianco* is reversed and the term is used with negative connotations. If in English, the expression 'white wedding' stands for a traditional and sumptuous wedding, the same cannot be said for its Italian equivalent *matrimonio in bianco*, which describes an unconsumed and unhappy marriage (ibid: 76). While the idiom *passare una notte in bianco* means having a sleepless night. The expression finds its origins in Mediaeval times when men, in order to become knights, had to spend the night prior to their knighting ceremony in prayer and meditation. They dressed in white to symbolise their moral integrity (Zingarelli, 2001: 1118). *Andare in bianco* means to fail in your goal. In this idiom white is synonymous of nothingness (Vocabolario Treccani online, <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/>).

The expression 'white elephant' is the only case where white assumes a negative and disapproving meaning in English. This idiom indicates something that is overly costly and of questionable utility (Philip, 2006: 77).

3.3 Black

Black is the extreme opposite of white both in the colour-spectrum and in colour figurative meanings. Black entails darkness, absence of light and night. As a result, this colour is associated with fear of the unknown, secrecy, dishonesty and evil (Smith, www.sensationalcolor.com). Black is also the colour of mourning and death. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that idioms dealing with black have negative connotations both in English and in Italian.

Since most ill deeds occur at night, which is usually associated with black, this colour has become

the symbol of illegal activities or dealings. Hence, the expressions 'black market' and *mercato nero*, and by extension the Italian idiom – which has no direct black English equivalent- *lavorare in nero*, that is to say to work without a legal contract or paying taxes (Philip, 2006: 73).

Humour is positively connoted in the two cultures studied, unless it involves sinister and malicious undertones that usually refer to death. In this case, English and Italian speakers use the disapproving terms of 'black humour' and *umorismo nero* (ibid: 73) Black is also the colour of evil and of supernatural. Therefore, if 'white magic' is pure and performed to do good, 'black magic' or *magia nera* aims at causing harm, distress and misery (ibid:74). People who act suspiciously or maliciously and look dangerous and menacing to others acquire black as an attribute: 'bête-noire' in English and *bestia nera* in Italian. 'Black sheep' and *pecora nera* for the person who has brought embarrassment or shame to the family (ibid: 74).

Italian, differently from English, uses *nero* to describe the section of newspapers consisting of murder and other serious offences: *cronaca nera* (crime news). Black also recurs in expressions such as *miseria nera*, *fame nera* and *crisi nera* (extreme misery, extreme hunger and severe crisis) to stress the severity of certain situations and to highlight the fact that death might just be around the corner (Sabatini, Coletti, www.dizionari.corriere.it).

Typical English idioms with no direct *nero* Italian equivalent are 'the pot calling the kettle black' and 'as not as black as s/he is painted'. Again, black stands for badness and negativity. The former idiom, which finds its Italian equivalent in the idiomatic expression *il bue che dà del cornuto all'asino*, is used when the accuser is reminded to consider his or her actions before criticising others since he / she is no better person, in fact they are both black. The latter, means that a person is not as bad as is said to be (Philip, 2006: 74). This expression has no fixed equivalent in Italian.

The combination of black and white in the same idiomatic expression produces an idiom with a remarkable meaning. This is the case of 'put down in black and white' and *mettere / scrivere nero su bianco* whose meaning does not entail badness and goodness but authority. In other words, if something is put down in black and white or *messo nero su bianco* is written in an official, authoritative and unquestionable way, usually contracts, deals and agreements fulfil these requirements (ibid: 74).

3.4 Red

Red is an extremely interesting colour as far as colour figurative meaning is concerned. It is a complex colour, rich in symbolism and particularly favoured in the coining of metaphorical idioms in English. First, red is universally associated with blood. Since blood is synonym of life, red has become the colour of life and by extension of passions and emotions. Thus, red represents love, seduction and desire. Second, red is the colour of fire which symbolises life as well as force, violence, rage, war and destruction. As a result, red is the colour of extremes: burning desires, intense passions, love and life on the one hand, and violent impulses and wrath on the other. Lastly, red is a sign of provocation and revolutions (Morton, www.colormatters.com).

The vast array of symbolic meanings of this colour has made language particularly abundant in red colour idioms. English and Italian employ red when referring to emotions such as anger, embarrassment and shame. If a person is embarrassed, they are 'red in the face' or 'go as red as a beetroot' or *diventare rosso*. Anger can make a person lose its temper and 'see red' or *vedere (tutto) rosso* (Philip, 2006: 78). An interesting case is brought by the idiom 'to be red with anger / rage', the Italian language offers two possible equivalents: *rosso di rabbia* and *nero di rabbia* ("black with anger"). Philipp remarks, "data shows that *rosso di rabbia* is in fact less common than *nero di rabbia*" (ibid: 78). Accordingly, both English and Italian express embarrassment and shame through red, but when it comes to anger things are a bit more complicated, since Italian colours this sentiment red and black, while English exclusively red.

English speakers also attribute anger, and therefore red, to animals. In particular, in the animal kingdom red stands for the brutality and violence required for the survival of the fittest. Hence, the idiom 'red in tooth and claw', where red is also a stark reminder of blood. According to tradition, bulls are believed to get angry at the sight of the colour red, consequently if someone might react violently to a situation, it is said that it 'is like a red rag to a bull' or 'like a red flag before a bull'. These expressions have no colour-word Italian equivalent (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 2002: 2).

Extreme anger and the intent to murder someone lie at the origin of the idiom 'catch someone red-handed'. Bloody hands serve as evidence of the vicious crime committed. However, this original meaning is now lost as the idiom can be used to refer to any illegal or wrong activity. Additionally, it is not used to talk about murder or bloodshed. The Italian idiom *cogliere /prendere con le mani nel sacco* (catch with one's hand in the bag or 'to catch somebody in the act') reflects the pragmatic meaning of the English idiom to catch red-handed and their contexts of usage are similar. *Cogliere*

con le mani nel sacco is usually used when referring to minor offences, especially to theft. For more serious crimes like murder, native Italian speakers tend to prefer the formal expression *cogliere in flagrante*, just like English speakers would opt for 'to catch someone in flagrante delicto' (Philip, 2003: 167-171). It is interesting to point out that *flagrante* derives from the Latin word *flagrans – antis*, the present participle of *flagrare* meaning to burn. Therefore, the term was originally connected to fire and to the colour red.

Red is the second most visible colour after yellow. It can strike observers' attention and capture it. For this reason, warning signs and fire engines are red in both cultures (Morton, www.colormatters.com). The great visual impact of the colour as a sign of danger has originated some fixed colour metaphors such as: 'red flag' and *bandiera rossa*; 'red alert' and *allarme rosso*; and *linea rossa* (meaning hot-line). All three expressions convey the meaning of immediate danger and urgency (Philip, 2006: 80).

The Italian expression *bandiera rossa* has two meanings worth noticing. The first is the one discussed above; the second is the icon of the Communist flag. Itten (1961: 134) observes that red is the colour of revolutions since it summarizes in itself the essence of rebellion: collective anger, political fervour and spilled blood. *Camicie rosse* (red shirts), a metaphorical way to refer to Communists, are the opposite of the infamous Fascist *camicie nere* (black shirts). Fascists wore black shirts as part of their uniforms. These two metaphors stem from Italian history and therefore find no equivalent in the English language (Philip, 2006: 80).

Red also means life, enjoyment and positivity. If someone goes out to 'paint the town red', they intend to celebrate in pubs and clubs. The positive connotation of the colour is also found in the proverb 'red sky at night, shepherd's delight' or *rosso di sera bel tempo si spera*. Although the proverb is mainly based on observation of meteorological phenomena, red appears as a positive element anticipating good weather.

'To roll out the red carpet' and *stendere il tappeto rosso* confer to red importance and royalty. The two idioms mean to give a guest a special treatment since red carpets are rolled out to royals (Cambridge online dictionary, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/>). Red is in English speaking countries, and particularly in the United Kingdom, the colour of bureaucracy as exemplified by 'red tape'. In this context, however, red assumes a negative connotation as a criticism to unnecessary and extremely complicated rules. This red-expression "refers to the pinkish-red ribbon which is traditionally used to bind official documents" (Philip, 2006: 80). Similarly, 'to be in the red' and

essere in rosso are also metonymically motivated. In finance credits are written in black ink whereas debits in red. As a result, if you are in the red or *in rosso*, you are in debt. However, *essere in rosso* is mainly used to refer to bank accounts; in every day conversation, Italian speakers prefer *essere al verde* (Vocabolario Treccani online, <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/>).

3.5 Green

Green is the colour of Mother Nature, landscapes and countryside. In ancient times green symbolized growth, energy and birth. For this reason, woods and trees were worshipped and treated as gods. Tree symbolism developed, giving trees mystical and magical powers. They stood for wisdom, beauty, strength and eternal life, and their fruits represented birth (Skuzza, 2010: 236). Hence, green has long been considered a positive or even lucky colour since it was a synonym of fertility. (Morton, <http://www.colormatters.com/>).

Green has maintained its iconic meaning over the centuries and has become the symbol of ecology, environmentalism and sustainability. This is why green or *verde* appears in environment related issues: 'green policies' (another term to refer to environmental policies), Greenpeace (an NGO environmental organization founded in Vancouver in 1971), 'green audit' (an official examination of the effects a company or other organization has on the environment), *i verdi* (an Italian political and environmentalist party).

Green or *verde* also comes in expressions less politically connoted such as *zona verde*, *polmone verde* and 'green belt'. *Zona verde* indicates the parks and green areas of a town or city. Trees, parks, woods and forests are *polmone verdi* - literally green lungs- (Skuzza, 2010: 237). The 'green belt' is according to Cambridge dictionary "a strip of countryside around a city or town where building is not allowed". The association of green with plants is salient in the idioms 'to have green fingers' or 'to have a green thumb', in American English and *avere il pollice verde*, which all describe people who have a special ability in cultivating plants (Cambridge online dictionary, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/>).

Spring is the time of the year when trees blossom and vegetation is lush. Consequently, green is also associated with youth. This meaning of green can be found in the Italian idioms *anni verdi* (green years) and *verde età* (green age) and in the English 'to be green', which is used to refer to someone

young and inexperienced. This expression, however, derives from green wood rather than from the link between spring and youth. Green wood is very supple and flexible just like inexperienced youths are (Philip, 2006: 83).

In Italian, money is green due to the colour of dollars, which in gangster movies is called *verdoni* (Skuzza, 2010:236). In spite of green being the colour of dollars, if you are *al verde*, you are broke. The expression might have originated in the Renaissance in Florence. At that time, it was custom to light a candle, which was green at the bottom, during public auctions. The candle was used to measure time: when the flame reached the green end of the candle, no more money could be offered and the auction closed (Enciclopedia Treccani online, <http://www.treccani.it/>).

Green is also the colour of emotions. According to Hippocratic medicine the bile, yellowish-green in colour, was responsible for human temperament. From this old theory and the metonymic connection between green / yellow and bile, derive three Italian idioms dealing with anger and rage, *verde di bile*, *verde di rabbia* and *verde di collera*; and envy, *verde di invidia*. The English language, on the contrary, does not associate anger with green (cfr. Section 3.4), but it does associate it with envy and jealousy, as exemplified by 'green with envy' and by the proverb 'the grass is always greener on the other side (of the fence)' or *l'erba del vicino è sempre più verde*. Green became the colour of envy in the 16th century thanks to the green-eyed monster in Shakespeare's Othello and it replaced yellow, the traditional colour of jealousy (Philip, 2006: 82-83).

3.6 Yellow

Yellow is by far the most visible and luminous colour of the colour-spectrum capable of capturing people's attention. The human eye processes this colour before any other; this is why some cautionary signs, for instance the 'slow' sign, and parts of ambulances are yellow in the United States (Morton, <http://www.colormatters.com/>).

Despite the fact that yellow is the colour of the Sun, sunshine and, by extension, of happiness, language is particularly poor in yellow-colour idioms. There are two main reasons to explain the considerable lack of yellow idioms both in English and in Italian. First, due to the affinity of yellow to gold and due to the greater monetary value of the latter, positive figurative meanings are attributed to gold instead (Philip, 2006: 81). Hence, we speak of someone kind and generous as 'a heart of gold' or *cuore d'oro*. If we are given a favourable opportunity that might never come again, we

colour it in gold: 'a golden opportunity' or *un'occasione d'oro* (Cambridge online dictionary, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/>). Second, most of yellow negative connotations, which derived from its metonymic connection to the bile, have been transferred to green (Ibid).

In English yellow is only associated with cowardice: 'to be yellow-bellied' and 'to have a yellow streak' (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 2002: 5). These expressions are not accounted for in Italian with a direct *giallo* equivalent but with the idiom *non avere il fegato* (not have the stomach for).

In the Italian culture and language alone, yellow is the colour of detective stories. The association of yellow and mystery originated in the Twenties when the publishing house Arnoldo Mondadori produced a collection of mystery novel, *Il Giallo Mondadori*, whose peculiarity was the yellow cover. These novels were so popular that the colour *giallo* became the icon of the genre as a whole. Therefore, a *libro / romanzo giallo*, or simply a *giallo*, is a detective story, and a *film giallo* is a thriller. *Giallo* also defines unsolved mysteries involving murder cases, this use of the term is common in mass-media (Philip, 2006: 83-84).

3.7 Blue

Blue is by far the most favourite colour by men and women as shown by the Blue Phenomenon. This term refers to the tendency of people to write down or think of blue when they are asked to cite the first colour that comes to their mind. This finding is particularly true for English-speaking countries, Japan and Kenya (Wiegersma & Van Der Elst, 1988: 308). One possible explanation of the Blue Phenomenon could be found in the values associated to the colour, namely constancy and calm being blue the colour of the sky and oceans (Smith, <http://www.sensationalcolor.com/>).

As far as English and Italian are concerned, blue is the most interesting colour to analyse for the numerous differences in the colour metaphorical and figurative meanings. First, Italian divides the blue colour-spectrum in a more detailed and precise way than English does. Consequently, there are three basic terms for blue: *blu*, *azzurro* (light blue) and *celeste* (sky blue). This characteristic of Italian, and of other Latin languages, is often set forth in order to show some shortcomings of Berlin and Kay's study (1969), which is accused of being too Westernised and English-centred in its approach (Lucy, 1992: 186). As a result, while in English blue is both the colour of the sky and of the sea, and of their relating metaphors, in Italian the sky is *azzurro* or *celeste* and the sea *blu*, and so are their metaphorical meanings. *Celeste* is also expression of the divine and heaven (Philip,

2003: 11).

Second, due to the close connection between *azzurro* and *celeste* to the sky, the home of God, in Italian these colours are synonyms of divine, spirituality and eternal bliss. In Christian iconography, *azzurro* and *celeste* are the colours of the Virgin Mary's mantle, since they were traditionally associated with purity, spirituality and peace (Skusa, 2010: 231-32). The Italian language reflects the sacredness of *celeste* in numerous religious Christian metaphors. English, on the contrary, makes use of the adjective 'heavenly' or of the noun 'heaven', since blue does not have any religious connotation in this language. For example, *il Padre Celeste* (Heavenly Father), *il Regno Celeste* (Kingdom of heaven), *la gloria celeste* (heavenly glory) and *le Schiere Celesti* (Heavenly hosts).

Third, *blu* and *azzurro* usually convey positive meanings in Italian, contrary to English where blue is negatively connoted. Hence, Prince Charming, the handsome and kind-hearted prince of fairy tales, who embodies the perfect partner, is called *Principe Azzurro* (light blue prince). The only case of similarity between the two languages is *avere il sangue blu* and 'blue blood', which means to belong to an aristocratic family. This expression seems to have originated from the practice of aristocrats to avoid exposing themselves to the sun. In the past, having white or even pale complexion was a status symbol as well as a sign of beauty and well-being. Aristocrats were not tanned because they did not have to work outdoors under the sun, in other words they were not peasants. The whiteness of their skin made the veins look darker, bluish in colour as if their blood was not red but blue (Skusa, 2010: 232).

Fourth, in English blue connotes negative feelings such as depression and fear, and unpleasant situations. Italian does not attribute these meanings to blue, therefore there are no direct blue equivalents for this set of English idioms. One example of an undesirable situation is expressed by 'to be caught between the devil and the deep blue sea', which refers to finding oneself in a risky situation where both choices are equally inconvenient. The Italian equivalent is *essere tra l'incudine e il martello* (literally to be between the anvil and the hammer, or 'to be struck between a rock and a hard place'). The Italian expression has similar pragmatic effect but no connotative value (Philip, 2006: 85). Blue is also sadness in English, hence the idioms 'to have the blues' and 'to feel blue'. Italian associates depression and desperation with black / *nero* instead (ibid: 74). *Nero* is found in expressions such as: *un periodo nero*, a bad period; *pensieri neri*, negative thoughts; *vedere tutto nero* (literally to see everything black) meaning being extremely pessimist; similar in meaning is *fare un quadro nero della situazione* (to paint a black picture of the situation). In conclusion, English and Italian attribute to depression different colours, blue for the former and black for the

latter, because the two cultures colour this sentiment differently.

Fear, however, can be expressed by means of blue: *fifa blu* and *essere blu dalla paura* although *fifa nera* or *paura nera* are also widely used as emphatic variants. Philip points out that it is uncertain and arduous to know whether blue is linked to fear also in English since the only relevant idiom is 'to scream blue murder'. Moreover, the colour blue might simply be part of the idiom as a transfer from the French exclamation *sacré bleu* (where blue is a corrupted form of *Dieu*, God); or an alternative version of the expression a 'bloody' murder, in this case blue is used because phonetically linked to the adjective (ibid: 85-86).

Fifth, the English blue also connotes unexpected events and unwelcome surprises: 'like a bolt from the blue' or simply 'out of the blue'. These idioms stem from the image of a calm and clear sky which is suddenly and unexpectedly troubled by a bolt of lightning. Italian conveys the same concept with the colour white: *di punto in bianco* (ibid: 84). Similarly, blue also recalls very rare, unusual and noteworthy events, extraordinary things that happen 'once in a blue moon'. Again, Italian has no blue equivalent but expresses the same concept with the idiom *ogni morte di Papa* (i.e. every death of a Pope).

Lastly, although red is associated with romance and love in both languages, pornography is blue in English while it is red in Italian. Consequently, the two languages speak of 'blue films' and *film a luci rosse*.

3.8 Brown

Brown has a close connection to the earth and soil; consequently, it encapsulates "stability, reliability and approachability" (Smith, <http://www.sensationalcolor.com/>), but also dirt and excrement (Philip, 2006: 88). Despite its link to earth – traditionally associated with prosperity, growth and wisdom- the colour has very little symbolism and it is remarkable to notice that the few English idioms containing brown are usually negatively connoted (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 2002: 8).

Brown does not only convey negative meaning, but it also expresses extreme and redundancy. This is the case of the idiom 'to be browned off' which expresses utter boredom. 'A brownfield site' is an area "occupied by redundant warehouses and factories" (ibid: 8); and of 'to brown-nose' that it to

say to fawn over someone in order to gain an advantage (ibid: 8). On a less negative tone, there is the idiom 'to be in a brown study' that describes someone who is distracted and unaware of what surrounds them (Cambridge online dictionary, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org>).

As far as Italian is concerned, there are no metaphorical brown idioms (Philip, 2006: 88). Consequently, the very few brown-idioms that exist in the English language have no direct correspondence in Italian.

3.9 Pink

Pink is the product of red and white, thus it stands midway between these two colours both on the colour spectrum and in colour symbolism. White attenuates the fiery passions evoked by red, therefore romanticism and flowers pertain to pink. Pink is also associated with youth, fun and excitement. Accordingly, it is a positive colour, synonym of happiness. By extension, pink refers to good health and perfect physical conditions (Philip, 2006: 86).

The symbolic meanings of pink are expressed in numerous English idioms that have no pink equivalent in Italian. These are: 'to be tickled pink' - i.e. to be very much amused, 'in the pink' or 'the pink of condition' - i.e. in excellent health and at peak fitness, and 'the pink of perfection' - i.e. sheer perfection to the smallest detail (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 2002: 9). 'To go pink (in the face)' shows milder embarrassment than 'go red'. This is a perfect example of how "the tempered colour reflects the tempered emotional state" (Philip, 2006: 86). Interestingly, *diventare rosa* does not exist in Italian despite the correspondence between go red and *diventare rosso* (cfr. Section 3.4).

Italian expressions with pink or *rosa* mainly deal with being optimistic as shown by the expression *vedere tutto rosa*, similar in meaning to the English 'to see something through rose-tinted glasses' (Philip, 2006: 87). Both expressions refer to positivity and to giving importance to the pleasant aspects of the life, for this reason it can be argued that *vedere tutto rosa* is the opposite of *vedere tutto nero* (c.f. section 3.7). *Rosa* also identifies romantic fiction as a genre: *romanzo rosa*, *libro rosa* and *letteratura rosa*, just like *giallo* refers to detective stories (c.f. section 3.6). From *letteratura rosa* derives a journalistic genre that focuses on celebrity gossip: *cronaca rosa* (c.f. *cronaca nera* section 3.3). *Cronaca rosa* looks for scandals in order to reveal a *scandalo rosa*. These examples of *rosa* are peculiarities of the Italian culture and therefore have no English equivalent.

3.10 Grey

Grey sits between the extremes of black and white. Together with pink, it is an example of tempered colour that conveys milder meaning than those that originated it. In grey the negativity of black is softened and the clarity and immaculateness of white is obfuscated. Therefore, symbolically speaking, grey is the colour of compromise and indeterminacy (Philip, 2006: 77). This sense of obfuscation and uncertainty is reflected in 'a grey area', i.e. something unclear, undetermined and hard to interpret. Likewise, a person who exerts power over rulers behind the scenes and sometimes with the intent of gaining personal advantage is 'an eminence grise' in English or *un'eminenza grigia* in Italian (ibid: 77).

In Italian grey expresses disinterest and tediousness: *una vita grigia* (a grey life), *un'esistenza grigia* (a grey existence), and a boring and cloudy day is a *giornata grigia*. *Grigio* stands for economic hardships and financial worries as shown by the expression *la situazione è grigia* or *una situazione grigia*. Similarly, 'a grey mood' is an unhappy one. These examples prove that negative expressions containing nero, such as *un periodo nero*, *una situazione nera*, *pensieri neri* etc., can be attenuated by grigio to express dullness rather than depression: *un periodo grigio*, *una situazione grigia*, *pensieri grigi*. As for 'a grey mood', it is a more attenuated feeling than 'a black mood'. Consequently, it is evident that the expressions involving grey or *grigio* can be worsened by the use of black or *nero* (Philip, 2003: 208-211).

Grey is associated with oldness in both cultures due to the metonymic relation between grey hair and age. However, Italian lacks of grey-age idioms. English, on the contrary, speaks of 'a grey-beard', 'grey power' and 'grey pound'. The first expression is used in a derogatory sense to refer to old men, while the last two highlight the wealth acquired in a lifetime. 'Grey power' describes "prosperous elderly retired people who have enough money to be able to afford private medicine and holidays and to live a life without financial worry" (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 2002: 9). Similarly, 'the grey pound' refers to elderly people having the opportunity to spend money on themselves (ibid: 9).

The only instance in which grey is positively connoted in both languages is in the expression 'grey matter' or *material grigia*, synonym of intelligence and wit (Smith, <http://www.sensationalcolor.com/>).

3.11 Purple and orange

In ancient Rome, purple was the colour of high rank and influential people. Only emperors, consuls, magistrates and generals could afford purple robes obtained from costly dyestuffs. The notion of wealth, sumptuousness and royalty can still be found in the idioms 'to be born in / to the purple', meaning to be the child of a king, and in 'to marry into the purple', meaning to marry a king or a prince (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 2002: 9). However, if a piece of writing is too florid and excessively ornate is referred to as purple: 'purple passage', 'purple prose', 'purple patches'.

Italian has no purple idioms maybe because *viola* is considered unlucky in Italy being it associated with the Christian Passion and death. This colour is particularly unlucky for theatre actors. In fact, in the Middle Ages, theatrical plays were banned during the Lent period, as a result actors were unemployed and suffered considerable economic distress (Focus.it <http://www.focus.it/cultura>).

Orange is a controversial colour: people usually either love it or hate it since it can symbolise heat, health and adventure but also abrasiveness and brass (Morton, www.colormatters.com). No orange idioms have been identified in English or Italian (Philip, 2006: 88).

4.0 Case study: the Lion King

The Walt Disney's animated film *The Lion King* (1994) provides a representative example of the missing correspondence in blue figurative meaning in the two languages and cultures under examination. In English blue is the symbol of sadness and depression, which is not the case in Italian, blue being a positively connoted colour. Since blue does not convey anguish in Italian, (cfr. section 3.7), the Italian version of *Il Re Leone* recurs to black / *nero* in order to express the same figurative meaning. This is an example of partial correspondence: the two languages convey the same meaning by means of a different colour.

The young lion Simba, son of King Mufasa, has just witnessed his father's death. The evil Scar manipulates him to believe he was responsible for his father's passing, thus forcing Simba to flee into exile in shame and despair. It is at this point that he meets Timon and Pumbaa.

Timon : He (Simba) **looks blue**

Timon: Ehi, è proprio **nero**

Pumbaa: I'd say brownish gold

Pumbaa: A me sembra marrone chiaro

Timon: No, no, no...I mean he's **depressed**

Timon: No, no, no intendo **depresso**

Pumbaa: Oh!

Pumbaa: Ah!

The scene is humorous in both languages because Pumbaa interprets Timon's remark literally, saying that Simba is not blue or *nero* but brownish. This joke highlights a salient aspect of idioms: their opacity, i.e. their "compositional decoding and interpretation [...] are practically or completely impossible without knowledge of the historical origins of the expression" (Moon, 1998: 23). Consequently, idioms cannot be literally understood (cfr. section 3.1).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, colour idioms are the product of a given language and culture. They are fixed expressions that relate to colour symbolism, connotation and metonymy. Therefore, they are culturally motivated and reflect into language the beliefs, customs and superstitions of a people. Some colour idioms, such as 'green with envy', originate from literary works, other from historical practises like *essere al verde*, and other from society, marketing or objects that have made the history of a country just like *un romanzo giallo*.

From the contrastive analysis of English and Italian colour idioms, it can be argued that despite the fact that English and Italian are not two distant cultures, several differences occur in colour idiomatic language. These differences result either in idioms with no fixed idiomatic equivalent in the other language such as *vedere tutto nero*, 'to be tickled pink' and *settimana bianca*, or in idioms that colour the same idea or sentiment differently such as 'out of blue' and *di punto in bianco* and 'to feel blue' and *essere nero*. There are also instances in which the other language does not use a colour idiom to express the same idea: 'once in a blue moon' and *ogni morte di Papa*, 'the pot calling the kettle black' and *il bue che dà del cornuto all'asino*, and 'to be caught red-handed' and *prendere con le mani nel sacco*.

Particularly interesting major differences can be found in white, yellow and blue. White is always positively connoted in English ('white lie', 'white magic') while in Italian it can also express negativity (*passare una notte in bianco*, *andare in bianco*, *matrimonio bianco*). Yellow stands for cowardice in English ('to be yellow-bellied' and 'to have a yellow streak') and for mysteries in Italian (*un giallo*), consequently there are no direct yellow or *giallo* equivalent idioms in the two languages because they do not attribute to this colour the same symbolism. Blue is the most problematic colour for these two languages and cultures. Italian, contrary to English, distinguishes the colour-spectrum in three blue terms (*blu*, *azzurro* and *celeste*) and attributes to them specific metaphorical meanings. The Italian blue is a sacred and pure colour representing God and good virtues such as consistency and loyalty, the English blue on the other hand is negatively connoted and deals with unwelcome surprises, undesirable situations and depression.

Pink, together with yellow, is another example of missing correspondence because the two languages do not attach the same figurative meaning to the colour. Pink stands for health, perfection and happiness in English ('to be tickled pink', 'in the pink' and 'the pink of condition') and for optimism and romantic fiction (*vedere tutto rosa*, *un romanzo rosa*) in Italian.

Consequently, these differences in colour idioms prove once again how culture affects language and how language influences people's experience and perception of the world and reality.

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