

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF COLOUR DESCRIPTION IN NIGERIAN AND GHANIAN ENGLISHES

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ABSTRACT

This study on the exploration of colour terms: A comparative study of colour description in Nigerian and Ghanaian Englishes is a qualitative study of colour terms as it is used in the fashion domain by two West African varieties of English language. The study describes shades of colours by Nigerian and Ghanaian speakers of English language. The theory adopted two theories namely, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Linguistics Relativity. The systemic functional linguistics is adopted because of the choices that people make in meaning explication while linguistic relativity is adopted because of the way the world is differently experienced and conceived in different linguistic communities. More so, humans have different perspective of the world and this is reflected through the languages spoken in their various communities. Data were randomly collected from Nigerians and Ghanaians who are into weaving of native attires. The data were obtained in written and audio-record format. Fifteen (15) colour terms were obtained for each of the varieties. The study reveals those Nigerians and Ghanaians speaker of English name colours after item peculiar to their immediate environment and culture. The paper concludes

that further research needs to be carried out in order to develop a framework that could account for the meaning of colours in indigenous languages both in Nigeria and Ghana and possibly other West African languages.

Keywords: West African, Englishes, Colour terms, Ghana and Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Colours are present everywhere and their existence have sparked human's interest. They make up the visible objects in human's environments, and humans in turn can identify objects through them. Impliedly, objects are incapable of being the source of their colours, thus, "light is the source of the colours" of objects (Awake!, 1971). Colours might either be natural or man-made products resulting from some complex interactions of wavelengths of lights and pigments of objects, as well as some processes of absorption and reflection. Additionally, the patterns and positions of an object contribute significantly to the production of certain colours depending on the pigments of the object (Awake, 1976).

The foregoing assertions show that the colours of objects are dynamic and not permanent considering the complex interactions that bring about colours. This is proven by the term christened as "colour constancy" by Craven and Foster (1992, p.1359) and explained by Keith as "...the phenomenon whereby the colours of objects are perceived to remain constant throughout variations in the conditions under which they are perceived..." (2016, p.16). This implies that visual objects do not just take on any colour at will, hence their colours are mostly constant. The colour constancy of visual objects is of immense importance to humans and cannot be overemphasized. Through them, humans distinguish, identify, and re-identify physical objects (Mollon, 1989, p.21). In the discussing more on the constancy of colours, their indirect capacities in particular, Allen (2016) expresses that:

Colour constancy is exceptionally important given the role that colours play in perceivers' mental lives.... Sameness and difference in colour is one of the ways that the visual system partitions scenes into discrete particulars in the first place...colours allow perceivers to assign objects to higher-order categories by acting as a guide to their

internal constitution: for instance, when we judge by its colour that an apple is ripe or a mushroom is poisonous. Colours also allow us to re-identify physical objects through gaps in their observation, as when we track the movement of someone wearing distinctively coloured clothing as they weave through a crowd (p.18).

The above addresses the importance of the constancy of colours on objects and the various capacities that colours hold, and even beyond. Humans in the various institutions of commercialisation do understand the nature of colours and the capacity of colour constancy too. With the aid of scientific researches, humans have discovered that people have a recurring pattern of perceiving colours. The confidence of such knowledge could have inspired Betensky (1995) to contribute the following:

Some clients feel colour intuitively and deeply. They have a conscious need for specific colour to suit or to soothe specific emotional moods. When they are elated or burdened with complex emotional experiences colour will be their chief vehicle of expression, sometimes with form at all. Their colour expression eventually does assume form, but the inner experience and its changes determines that. Once colour assumes form, the role of form becomes clear: it then defines colour, contains within boundaries and bestows upon it an articulate vital meaning (p.74-75).

The above is a summary of the manifestation of colours and the capacities of colours on humans, thus making it safe to conclude that colours are deliberately implored in the commercial world.

Statement of the Research Problem

Colour studies on the English colour terms have led to thousands of papers and books being written from different approaches such as psychology, cognitive linguistics, textual analysis and anthropology. In anthropology we find several works that have led to the interest in the linguistic aspect of colour semantics. Seminal works such as those by Conklin (1955), Berlin and Kay (1969), Brown and Lenneberg (1954) and Lucy (1992) all point to the fact that the study of colour categorisation,

naming, symbolism, association and metonymy provides answers (and more questions) about how people categorise the world and how they engage in meaningful interaction. Indeed, the study of colour has gone beyond just explaining whether colour terms are universal or relative. Biggam (2014: 9) explains that semantic studies “attempt to investigate the detailed web of meaning, and thereby reduce omissions and misunderstandings” related to the ambiguous nature of colour terms, for example, idiomatically green as a colour term in English is used to talk about envy or environmental concerns. Colour studies have shown how colour has certain associations and value to groups of people. Such examinations have led to comparative studies between and among different languages with a view to revealing how they conceptualise colour and what colour terms mean to them. English is a one of the languages with a globally high number of speakers. It belongs to the Indo-European family and is related to languages such as German and French. Due to its diverse speakers around the world, English has acquired several varieties in various countries. These varieties are called New Englishes. The present study is an attempt to demystify the ambiguity inherent in colour terms in two West African varieties of English; Nigerian and Ghanaian English.

Conceptual review

It is not an opinion that humans encounter colours in various aspects of their lives. Yet more, it has been in human nature to name things that reoccur for descriptive and comparative purposes. To describe and compare colours, human languages (not all) have various conventional systems of colours (Wierzbicka, 2006, p.3). On the issue of the descriptive system of colours in different languages, Berlin and Kay (1969, p.5-14) have explained in details on whether or not the description of colour is universal. However, Wierzbicka (2006) on colour description in different languages settles that “it is true that the absence of words does not prove the absence of the concept...” (p.3).

The human's descriptive system of colours is not the same per se, rather it varies across human languages. This puzzling observation is of concern to Saeed (2016) in his explication of colour terms, thus propelling him to express that “while we might readily expect differences from words relating to things in the environment such animals and plants, or for culture system and governance or kinship terms, it might seem surprising that terms for colours should vary, after all, we all share the same physiology”

(p.74). In the same vein, Berlin and Kay (1969, p.15-14) do not deviate from the above notion. Their investigations into the basic colour terms in human language acknowledge the variations of the human descriptive system of colours. However, inferring from Brown and Lenneberg (1954, p.457), this is not to say that humans have an irregular sensation of colours, neither is this to say that human's background does not contribute to the various variations of colour system, hence it means humans everywhere do not see or think of the colour world in the same way.

The variations in the descriptive system of colours are evident in the naming of them. It has been referred to as "codability" or "colour term" by Brown and Lenneberg (1954), and Berlin and Kay (1969) respectively. In reliance on the words of Dedrick (1998, p.11), the variations in the descriptive system of colours follow a certain naming structure that is briefly explained in the following sentence. The "colour categorisation in some languages may be expressed lexically; in others that categorisation is expressed in terms of words combinations." Whilst the initial structure (lexically) serves as the pattern for "basic colour terms", and most accounts for codability of the system of colours in most natural languages as seen in Saeed (2016), observably, the latter (words combinations) accounts for codability of the system of colours in the varieties of English language.

The observation of the codability of the system of colours in the varieties of English language is the impetus momentum behind the investigation of colour description in two of the West African varieties of English viz: Ghanaian English and Nigerian English. As seen in Dedrick (1998) and Saeed (2016), colour description is perceived primarily at the lexical level. However, going by the functional usage of words as inferred from Neddar (2017), colour description in the varieties of English can be perceived at other levels of language including the lexical level and phonological level. These levels are what characterises the codability of the system of colours in the varieties of English as opposed to their initial forms in Standard English.

Empirical review on colour terms

This segment of the paper briefly review works done on colour terms. One contemporary trend in colour studies is comparing the colour systems of different languages or varieties. The Danish linguist, Hjelmslev (1953: 33), compares how the field of colour was in the past divided up by English and literary Welsh. In English, the terms blue and parts of green

and grey were covered by the term *glas* in Welsh, while parts of the field of English green and grey + brown were covered by the Welsh terms *gwyrd* and *llwydd* respectively. But Palmer (1996) argues that this one-dimensional field does not account for the way colour terms are used in language. He exemplifies this by saying we do not say one colour e.g. red is more than another colour, say blue. Consequently, he asserts that looking as the physical characteristics of colour, colour can be accounted for using three variables namely, hue, lightness and saturation. Other comparative studies include Krimer-Gaborovic (2014) which examines the blue colour category in English and Serbian, and note that there are no similarities in terms of colour associations of blue in these languages.

Similarly, Paramei, Griber and Mylonas (2017) conducted an online experiment which compared coordinates of centroids for 12 basic Colour Terms and 11 English Basic Colour Terms. The study found that there were differences in how native Russian speakers divided up the colour space of BLUE, and to a lesser extent BROWN and RED. Furthermore, Russian showed a linguistic refinement of the PURPLE area, compared to English. On their part, Mylona, McDonald and Griffin (2017) used online data to compare the speed in colour naming among American and British English speakers. They found that American English speakers named colour 10% faster than the British respondents. However, the British English speakers displayed a richer vocabulary of colour terms.

Earlier approaches to studying colour include the field theory. The field theory progressed from the work of German linguists, notably Trier, and American anthropologists. Lehrer uses the field theory to explain how it is that “words can come to have new meanings in certain contexts, and... we can predict what semantic and syntactic features a totally new word will have when added to a lexical field” (1974: 110). It is helpful to distinguish between the more or less stable or conventionalised meanings of words and those which are ‘extensions’ of these words. Lehrer (1974:7) explains the field theory as a one which “treats a related set of words that belong to a domain”, and where a word acquires its meaning through its relationship of contrasts with other words in the domain. One such domain is that of colour which she shows can belong to a ‘general’ domain and a more restricted domain. For example, the general domain of colour would include terms such as red, green, blue, and the restricted terms would include terms such as rust, sand, turquoise, etc. But then there are even terms for particular domains such as hair colour which features terms that are not exactly

restricted because of the limited number of hair colours. Besides, there is not a clear cut one-to-one correspondence between the general colour terms and the restricted hair set colour terms. For instance, “many shades of ‘yellow’ hair would also [in addition to those of red hair] fall into a part of the brown range” (Lehrer 1974: 7). Similarly, Lehrer says if there were to be a new colour for a hair dye, another colour term, usually from the ‘general domain’ would be used. In the field theory, not all words are of equal status, and people can differentiate between basic and peripheral words. She uses Berlin & Kay’s (1969) criteria for distinguishing basic colour terms, most of which can be applied to other domains. In contrast to basic words, periphery words will be lower in the taxonomy, likely to be morphologically complex, limited in their application and distribution, may be recent loan words and are largely unknown to many speakers of the language (Lehrer 1974: 11).

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative. It obtained the lists of words used in describing colours in two West African varieties of English language viz: Nigeria and Ghana. The focus of this investigation was on how colours are described in the fashion niche of these countries. The participants that constitute the source of the data for this paper are people who are into the weaving of Aso-Oke or other native attires. They constitute the population of this study because this study seeks to find how colours are described in Ghana and Nigeria in the fashion niche which constitutes an aspect of human lives. Another reason for limiting the population of this study was to obtain more authentic data in the sense that the population are not proficient speakers of English language, yet they use English when describing the colours of cloth materials with their clients who are also not proficient speakers of English language. During this transaction, in order to ensure an exact description of the colour of the cloth materials, they often use the existing colour term or create easily remembered terms from exiting or familiar objects.

Theoretical Framework

To justify or back up the investigation of how colours are described in the varieties of English, specifically in West Africa, two theories have been selected. These theories are: The Systematic Functional Linguistics model and the Linguistic Relativity theory. Going by O’Donnell (2012), the

systematic functional model is a creation of the linguist, Bronislaw Malinowski around the 1920s, and a significant development of the linguist M.A.K Halliday circa the 1960s. This theory is essential in the justification of this research because it “is more interested in how language is utilised in social settings to attain a specific target,” (p.2). Ekoru and Gunn (2020) opined that the fundamental principle of Halliday’s SFG theory is the notion of choice on linguistic items. Also, the inference of Almurashi (2017) that “...with the use of language, great importance is placed on the function of language, such as what language is used for rather than what language structure is all about and how it is composed,” (p.73) further assert to the justification of this theory.

Moreover, the systemic functional model is largely concerned with the “term of choice potential”. Impliedly, the Systemic Functional model is focused more on how choice is made rather than how the structure is constructed to realise the meaning, (Christie, 2002, p.8). The aim of the Systemic Functional model is not to apotheosize the place of language form over the place of language function. This is because language is viewed “as a practical means of expressing meaning rather than as an abstract set of relation” (Flowerdew, 2013, p.12). The essence for proving the need to adopt Systemic Functional linguistics is presented by Neddard (2017) as follows:

Language has evolved through time with the evolution of human species so as to cope with its needs. It is, hence organised as such. What is of interest is the way language has been fashioned to meet our social needs. The Systemic Functional model of linguistic description should, hence, reflect the essential social nature of language. Its design has to represent the social purposes/functions language has evolved to fulfil (p.58).

Deductively, the quotation above approves of the changing nature of language and humans. More so, the expression signs off the need for humans to be flexible by blending with change, thus adopting a suitable use of language with the view of purpose and function.

To relate the above justifications with an investigation into how colours are described in the varieties of English in West Africa is to first admit that the gradual evolution of language is accountable for the presence

of the varieties of English in West Africa. With the Standard English traversing the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of West Africa, there are inevitable chances of its modification. This modification is inevitable because a new set of speakers vastly different from those in the British Isles have acquired the language. This set of new speakers otherwise known as the West Africans have their peculiarities including their exposure, culture, preferences, sensitivities and languages. These peculiarities of this new set of speakers serve as the resources from which Standard English is described, thus bringing about the relabeling of the status of Standard English to different varieties depending on the location of this set of new speakers.

This study adopts the linguistic relativist theory as the second theory that justifies the investigation of the description of colours in the varieties of English. The leading proponents of this theory are Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. The theory springs from what is historically known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In favour of linguistics relativism, Udofot (1998, p.107) states that “the way we see the world depends to some degree on the language we use”. In other words, because there are numerous languages, there can also be numerous perspectives of the world. This statement goes hand in hand with the inference of Whorf’s thesis explained in Brown and Lenneberg (1954, p.455), that “the world is differently experienced and conceived in different linguistic communities.” Impliedly, humans have different perspectives of the world, and these perspectives are reflected through the languages spoken in their communities. Brown and Lenneberg (1954) went on to state Whorf’s rejection of the common view that universally unifies human languages and thoughts are reported as follows:

He suggested that each language embodies and perpetuate a particular world view. The speakers of the language are partners to an agreement to see and think of the world in certain way—not the only possible way... Language is not a cloak following the contours of thoughts. Languages are molds into which infant minds are poured. Whorf thus departs from the common sense view in (a) holding that the world is differently experienced and conceived in different linguistic communities and (b) suggesting that

language is casually related to these psychological differences. (p.455)

Impliedly, human thought is influenced by its most familiar realities, and languages are not rigid towards these realities but are flexible to them. Considering this study from the purview of the linguistic relativist theory, the description of colours in the varieties of English rather than being universal, vary. This variation is the pillar behind linguistic relativism. In a nutshell, the linguistic relativity theory proposes that humans' various interpretations of reality through languages are influenced by their thoughts and things that make up their thoughts.

Data Presentation

The colour descriptions in Ghanaian English and Nigerian English have been obtained from respondents who are into African fashion style in Nigeria and Ghana. The data were obtained in written and audio record format, and at least, 10 data have been obtained for each of the varieties.

Table 1: Ghanaian English Description of Colour

	Descriptive Term	Actual Term
1.	Silo Red	Vermilion
2.	Red Blood	Maroon
3.	Red Palm Oil	Sinopia
4.	Red Pepper	Scarlet
5.	Yellow Ginger	Mustard
6.	Golden Yellow	Gold
7.	Yellow Chicken Fat	Old Gold
8.	Butter Yellow	Cream
9.	Dirty Brown	Ochre
10.	Green Fresh Leaf	Apple
11.	Green Yam Leaf	Mantis
12.	Green Beans	Pistachio
13.	Black Funeral Cloth	Raisin Black
14.	Purple Water Yam	Mauve
15.	White Palm Wine	Isabelline

Table 2: Nigerian English Description of Colour

	Descriptive Term	Actual Term
1.	Golden yellow	Gold
2.	Custard yellow	Mustard
3.	MTN yellow	Metallic Yellow
4.	Golden morn yellow	Fawn
5.	Christmas green	Japanese Laurel
6.	Nigerian green	Spanish Green
7.	Bottle green	Bangladesh Green
8.	Carton brown	Deer
9.	Cockroach brown	Liver
10.	Pepper red	Scarlet
11.	Ribena purple	Antique Fuchsia
12.	Biro blue	Indigo
13.	Ash silver	Lavender Gray
14.	Jollof orange	Spanish Yellow
15.	Milkish cream	Milk

Data Analysis

The tables above show both the non-standard descriptive terms (henceforth coinages) for various colours or shades of colours in Ghana and Nigeria, as well as their actual or standard terms. Notably, the coinages in table 1 constitute terms related to agriculture while the coinages in table 2 are not limited to agriculture. The role of the systemic functional linguistics is clearly manifested in the sense that the systemic functional model upholds that language and human evolution prioritise the social function of a language over the standard form of that language. Observably, this rationalises the preference for the coinages to the actual terms. For example:

Speakers	Descriptive Term	Actual Term
Ghanian	Purple Water Yam	Mauve
	White Palm Wine	Isabelline
Nigerian	Biro Blue	Indigo
	Golden Morn Yellow	Fawn

Universally, the standard form of describing a shade of purple, and a shade of white is mauve and isabelline respectively. Ghanaians hurriedly replace the actual terms with coinages that they are more familiar with, fittingly descriptive, and mutually intelligible viz, purple water yam [*dioscorea alata*], and white palm wine correspondingly. This is a mutual situation in Nigeria where indigo and fawn are replaced with biro blue and golden morn yellow respectively. The replacing terms or the coinages adopt a compounding pattern called endocentric compounding, a pattern that consists of a head and a modifier, and which is not mostly the case in the structure of the actual terms.

In the light of the contribution of the linguistic relativism, the language of the speakers configures whatever the speaker perceives. Impliedly, the speaker's creative ability to describe and comprehend the terms of objects stays within boundary the language. This justifies the usage of most of the coinages in tables 1 and 2 by their speakers respectively. The preference of Ghanaians for their coinages is majorly owing to language transfer while the preference of Nigerians for their coinages is primarily owing to semantic extension or generalisation. For example:

Speakers	Descriptive Term	Actual Term
Ghanian	Yellow Chicken Fat	Old Gold
	Green Fresh Leaf	Apple
Nigerian	Ribena Purple	Antique Fuchsia
	MTN Yellow	Metallic Yellow

The coinages used by Ghanaians are mostly structure words in their indigenous languages which are translated into English. For instance, *Kontomire* in Akan language refers to green fresh leaf while *Akok-angua* connotes the yellow fat in chicken. Although meanings in the indigenous languages of Ghanaians are translated into English when describing colours, the nominal pattern of English is maintained. In contrast, the coinages by Nigerians is rationalised by semantic extension or generalisation. Impliedly, the information associated with Ribena, a blackcurrant juice, and MTN, a mobile telecommunication company becomes generally extended to their physical (colour) features. Hence, a shade of purple and a shade of yellow viz, antique fuchsia and metallic

yellow are replaced with the physical feature of Ribena, and the physical feature of MTN, respectively. They become considered as the specific purple of Ribena and the specific yellow of MTN.

Again, linguistic relativism accounts for the varieties of coinages for an object by different speakers of different language varieties. In favour of linguistics relativism, Brown and Lenneberg (1954, p.455) justify the situation as thus: “the world is differently experienced and conceived in different linguistic communities.” Hence, there is bound to be a different description for a particular object. For example:

Speakers	Varieties	Actual Term
Ghanian	Yellow Ginger	Mustard
Nigerian	Custard Yellow	

The consequence of linguistic relativism is that a shade of yellow viz, mustard is described differently by different speakers. Whilst Ghanaians refer to it as yellow ginger, Nigerians refer to it as custard yellow. More so, the linguistic relativists argument on experiencing and conceiving the world differently by different communities affects the nature of the nominal patterning of some coinages table 1 and 2. It zeroes out the possible instances of experiencing and conceiving the world similarly.

Speakers	Descriptive Term	Actual Term
Ghanian	Red Pepper	Scarlet
Nigerian	Pepper Red	

For instance, a shade of red namely, scarlet, is not described similarly by different communities. Even when the terms constitute similar words, the situation of linguistic transfer of nominal structure from the indigenous languages in Nigeria affects the word ordering of the coinages, thus accounting for why the nouns precede the adjective of colours in table 2.

Discussion of findings

Observably, the non-standard coinages for various colours or shades of colours in the presented data share two similar patterns: compounding and derivation. This means that two or more words constitute a colour description and a word can derive one meaning from another. Furthermore, each element of the compounds constitutes a globally accepted meaning,

thus making the terms mutually intelligible almost globally, and the coinages are derived from the existence of the shades of some primary colours.

Additionally, the natures of the coinages are noteworthy. The items that constitute the coinages in table 1 are not only agricultural related terms, they are basically terms related to raw or unprocessed agriculture. The situation is not the same in the case of the counterpart. The terms that constitute the coinages in table 2 are quite all-encompassing and are not limited to raw agricultural terms rather they feature processed agricultural terms the most. According to Adika (2016) on the categorisation of the vocabulary of Ghanaian English, the situation that accounts for the coinages in table 1 is called semantic restriction while the situation that accounts for most of the coinages in table 2, according to Adegbite, Udofot and Ayoola (2014) is as a result of semantic shift, specifically semantic extension or generalisation.

The roles of the ideologies of the systemic functional linguistics and linguistic relativism account for these non-standard coinages in Nigeria and Ghana technically. These models rationalise linguistic situations like language transfer, semantic extension or generalisation, semantic restrictions, derivation and endocentric compounding, a situation where the information a word conveys becomes broader, and it is peculiar to postcolonial Englishes and bilinguals.

Considering the systemic functional linguistics, a standard form of description can be hurriedly replaced with a coinage that is more familiar, fittingly descriptive, and mutually intelligible to the speaker because it focuses on the communicative need of the speaker than the structure of the language. On the other hand, linguistic relativism account for the source from where a speaker picks a term that he finds more familiar, fittingly descriptive, and mutually intelligible for an object, and why such term varies across the varieties of a language.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore colour terms in Nigerian and Ghanaian Englishes. From the discussion so far, it is glaring that the constancy of colours or shades of colours remains undisputed. More so, the various forms of colour codability or descriptions of colours do not imply that humans or different speakers of English including Nigerians and Ghanaians perceive colours or shades of colours differently. However, it

does suggest that humans including Nigerians and Ghanaians describe similar colours or shades of colours differently. Over and beyond, this discussion reveals how the theories of both systemic functional linguistics and linguistics relativism account for the different descriptions of colours or shades of colours by English speakers in Nigeria and Ghana. By way of recommendation, further research needs to be carried out in order to develop a framework that could account for the meaning of colours in indigenous languages both in Nigeria and Ghana and possibly other West African languages.

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