Anthropology of color: Interdisciplinary multilevel modeling

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Both the title and size suggest that this book represents the state of the art, both in understanding the linguistic development of diverse categorizations of color and as a synthesis of multidisciplinary insights. Twenty-six articles are arranged in three sections: color perception (5), color cognition (11), and color semiosis (10). More broadly, two radically opposed research paradigms are represented. A cognitive/anthropological approach accounts for how speakers of contemporary languages use terminology to categorize colors. The central questions concern whether the focal points of the basic colors are universal, how biology and experience influence the delineation of color boundaries, and whether there are evolutionary stages in the development of color-systems that correlate with technological advancement. The opposed philological approach is dependent upon ancient, secondary sources—etymologies, cognates in related languages, translated texts, grammatical features, paintings, jewelry, amulets, textiles, and, most importantly, records of color term usage in describing natural objects.

Unfortunately, this volume lacks a synthesis of these paradigms. Rather, philologists denigrate the anthropological approach. Alexander Borg remarks rather condescendingly, “Thus scholars studying ‘primitive’ classifications of natural colors among Naturvölker, such as pastoralists, are not infrequently baffled by the sophisticated skills required to use contextualized terms correctly” (288). One may wonder just how sophisticated is a philologist’s skill that assumes that the range of meaning for a term can be determined by its application to natural objects. Consider, for example, that red, as in red rock canyon, when considered abstractly, refers to a color that is well in the range of brown. The philological approach would consider this attributive use of red to a natural object as an indication of a broad range for red. In so doing philologists would fail to consider markedness theory and cognitive reference points, that the most salient color and the cognitive reference point for rock is likely grey, and that the red in red rock can best be understood in terms of markedness.

Another philologist, David Warburton, disparages the “theoretical” Berlin and Kay system as a “preconceptualized straightjacket” that slants an interpretation to modern ways of thinking and may actually hinder an understanding of color-term evolution (230). He apparently fails to see that the philological method may also be regarded as a preconceptualized straightjacket that
prevents the distinction of abstract color terms. Similarly, Barbara Saunders, without citing Thomas Kuhn, invokes the Kuhnian model of scientific paradigms to assert that the current consensus in the study of color is grounded in scholarly communities that wield authority in terms of “philosophical presuppositions, scientific theories, experimental practices, technological apparatus, and their recursive feedback into the lifeworld” (468). Having once recognized its paradigmatic status, she claims to be agnostic, a position which apparently frees her to embrace objectivity, to critique the contemporary scene, and to transcend the universalism-relativism dichotomy. In her critique, however, she invokes Hegelian philosophy with insights from James, Husserl, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. This is, of course, nothing more than the rejection of one paradigm in favor of a competing one. Relativism has been shifted from the domain of color to that of paradigm commitment.

Nevertheless, philologists make some notable points and promising suggestions. Seija Kerttula introduces the concept of “relative basicness”. She offers some interesting observations regarding how universals may be augmented by cultural factors. Her treatment of basic as a graded category is consistent with the notions of prototype effects and fuzzy concepts. In so doing, she significantly increases the number of terms that may be considered basic.

The significance of ecological factors is noted by the anthropologists Michael Webster and Paul Kay who observe what is obvious to the world traveler, namely, that “natural environments do in fact vary widely in their color properties” (27). Along this same line, Kerttula notes that for Finns an “interest in cooler colors is converse to the red-biased development of English” with the Finnish blue and white flag possibly reflecting the “environmental chromaticness due to the climate in Finland” (160). This observation may be relevant to the fact that the flags of some desert nations tend to display light browns, whereas those of island and coastal nations tend to display light blues.

For color semiosis, the studies of Gunnar Bergh for Swedish car color names and Dessislava Stoeva-Holm for German fashion describe how colors reflect positive connotations and express concepts of status and sophistication. Studies in color semiosis, combined with the influence of the color properties of natural environments, suggest that further research is in order. For example, flags have a high symbolic value for nationhood and tend to display the focal points of basic colors. On the other hand, clothing typically serves to emphasize individualism, and fashionable colors are generally not focal, nor basic. Why this is so suggests that an understanding of color terminology and the role that color plays in our lives requires a synthetic and holistic approach.

The publication of this book does lay the groundwork for building a synthesis. The philologists have noted some important data on the historical development of color categorization, data that are relevant for the cognitive approach. For example, Warburton’s discussion of diffusion and evolution raises some important issues with his observation that color abstraction more readily occurs when a loanword is divested of its concrete meaning during transmission (242). The loss of a concrete reference is a precondition for the emergence of abstract meaning. Hopefully, this book will foster further multidisciplinary research with a goal of developing a more integrated and holistic vision of color categorization.