



Please pass me the skin coloured crayon! Semantics, socialisation, and folk models of race in contemporary Europe



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the cultural semantics of colour words in the four urban, European communities of Munich, Berne, Aarhus, and Reykjavik, focussing on *hautfarben* (German), *hutfarb* (Bernese Swiss German), *hudfarvet* (Danish), and *húðlitur* (Icelandic), all of which can be translated as 'skin coloured'. Unlike in English, where *skin coloured* has fallen out of use due to its racist semantic profile, these words are still widely present within the four communities. Using evidence from a referential colour naming task and semi-structured interviews, our study seeks to reveal the linguistic worldviews and idealised cognitive models embedded in skin-based colour concepts in contemporary German and Scandinavian languages. Arguing that colour concepts are linguistic constructs through which speakers have learned to pay attention to their visual worlds, we trace the origin of the skin-based colour concept to language socialisation. Our study suggests that children's use of crayons in pre-schools, homes, and kindergartens have a formative impact on the acquisition of colour concepts in general, and in particular, in acquiring a skin-based colour concept. Apart from 'crayon socialisation' and children's drawing practices, our study points to one other salient aspect of meaning associated with the skin-based colour concept, namely socio-political discourses of multiculturalism, political correctness and racism. Some speakers find it 'natural' to use a skin-based colour concept while others find it 'racist'. Yet regardless of an individual speaker's views on the matter, they all appear to recognise the specific folk model of race, encoded in *hautfarben*, *hutfarb*, *hudfarvet* and *húðlitur*. In addition, based on the disagreement among speakers, we do find some evidence that discursive changes in German and Scandinavian languages could lead to similar changes as the ones which have taken place in English (i.e. the replacement of *skin coloured* with *peach* or a similar construct). Skin-based colours in Germanic languages also offer new perspectives on visual semantics, the social origins of colour, and on the interface of language, sociality and colour.

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates the language of “skin colour” in contemporary Europe, focusing on the semantics of four words: German *hautfarben*, Bernese Swiss German *hutfarb*, Danish *hudfarvet*, Icelandic *húðlitur* and the wider societal implications of the use of these terms in their respective linguistic communities. For reasons of convenience, this paper will refer to these meanings collectively as ‘the *hautfarben* concept’ when addressing the general concept. To describe language-specific issues, we will refer to the specific words: *hautfarben*, *hutfarb*, *hudfarvet*, and *húðlitur*. Unlike in English, where the term *skin coloured* has largely fallen out of use (see Section 3), these words are still widely used within the four communities. Importantly, the *hautfarben* concept is not only used to describe people. Objects, such as eyeliners, bras, and nylon stockings can be described as *hautfarben*, as well as decontextualised, abstract colour tiles. A prerequisite for this conceptualisation is a consensus in the linguistic communities that people’s skin has a certain colour. This again presupposes an idealised cognitive model of what skin should look like, or in Hill’s words an ‘unmarked and unnoticeable norm’ (Hill, 1998). Even if one does not agree with the worldview embedded in words like *hautfarben*, *hudfarvet*, *hutfarb* and *húðlitur*, if the linguistic community at large thinks and operates through such words, one cannot simply ignore their existence and potential impact. Words and discourses are ‘mutually reproducing each other’ (Pennycook, 1998, p. 8), and as such the meanings of words like *hautfarben*, *hudfarvet*, *hutfarb* and *húðlitur* are both the products of discourse, and producers of discourse.

With insights from studies in language socialisation and cultural semantics, our aim is to shed light on the semantics and the sociovisual ideologies embedded in the underlying *hautfarben* concept. We are using two methods, a referential colour naming task and semi-structured interviews, in our attempt to unravel the meaning of *hautfarben*, and to understand the motivations for using or avoiding the use of the word. More specifically, we are interested in representing the ‘folk models of race’ (Hill, 2008).

Racialisation and the discourse of race have been studied extensively across disciplines. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to give an overview of the extensive range of literature on race in various disciplines, but to situate our study we will briefly deal with some main findings and insights (for general anthropological theory on race, see e.g. Gregory and Sanjek, 1994; Fluehr-Lobban, 2006). Studies have shown how “race” can be embedded in the workings of the law (e.g. Delgado and Stefancic, 2000), enacted in taken-for-granted everyday routines (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Feagin, 2006) as well as how racial self-construction works in various racialised communities (e.g. Hirschfeld, 1996; Steele, 1997). Historians have investigated the emergence of the concept of race and its use across eras (e.g. Blight, 2001), and philosophers have questioned the underlying logics of race and racism (e.g. Goldberg, 1993). It seems clear that “race” is not simply a natural phenomenon, but ‘an unstable ... complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle’ (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 15), and that ‘racial formation’ is a ‘process by which social, economic and political forces ... determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings’ (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 12). Stuart Hall (2002), developing further on the ‘discursive concept of race’, has shown how systems of meanings are used to ascribe “race” to certain groups of people, and in this way organise the social world into kinds.

This paper takes its point of departure in these insights, and especially in “racialization”, i.e. the idea that race and its various language-specific elaborations are linguistic constructs, embedded in social history, and used, consciously or unconsciously, to create and maintain certain social orders. The racialisation perspective helps us to denaturalise the concept of ‘*hautfarben*’ and to deconstruct contemporary sociovisual reifications of colour, such as *hautfarben* in German and Scandinavian discourses, and *black and white* in Anglophone discourses (on the social construction of the racial meanings of *black and white*, see Ware, 1992; Stokes, 2001). The best way to denaturalise ideologies and to relativise “skin semantics” is to confront the current reifications of colour with different cultural and historical approaches to a visually based categorisation of people. For example, in Sudanese Arabic *axdar*, roughly ‘green’ and *azrak*, roughly ‘blue’ (Bender, 1983, p. 19), are used to distinguish people, e.g. one can say *loonu axdar*, ‘his colour is green’. This distinction between ‘green’ and ‘blue’ people is lost on English speakers who view Sudanese through their own sociovisual category of *black*, and leave it to Martians to be *green*. In 18th century Americans, Swedes and Germans were not considered to be ‘white people’, but were thought of as ‘swarthy’ (Hill, 2008; Ahearn, 2012). Jane Hill comments: ‘Contemporary White Americans can no longer see “swarthy” among Swedes, and find it astonishing that anyone ever did so’ (2008, p. 14). Between the 13th and the 16th century in Europe, the semantics of skin included numerous different categories such as *albus* ‘white’, *verdastro/verdâtre* ‘greenish’, and *nigra* ‘black’ and these were believed to be linked to a changing mix of varying body juices (Sanjek, 1994; Groebner, 2003). Cross-cultural and cross-temporal examples demonstrate that skin colour categories are social constructs with little intrinsically natural about them (see also Dominguez, 1986; Menchaca, 1993; for a historical overview of the language of race in America, see Forbes, 1993). Given these facts, it is all the more intriguing that several European languages in the beginning of the 21st century operate with a sociovisual ideology of *hautfarben*, a concept that appears to have gained currency in the early 20th century (*hudfarvet*, ODS).

The global discourse of “race” is relatively recent, and intrinsically linked to European colonialism. In colonial discourse, race was used as a rationale for the view that European global rule was both natural and inevitable (Linton, 1936; Cox, 1984; Sanjek, 1994; Hill, 2008; on the historical roots of European racialisation, see also Origo, 1955; Phillips, 1985; Drake, 1987; Epstein, 2001). In the 16th century, *raza* ‘race’, a word originally used for breeds of horses and dogs, was applied to humans (Davis, 1997; Back and Solomos, 2000). It was used first in Spain, later in Italy, France and England, and gave rise to a whole new way of talking and thinking about humans (Smedley, 1993). In the 17th century, attempts to classify the world’s population into races were suggested by natural and medical scientists, philosophers, and historians. In 1758, the Swedish

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