

Language, contact, and vantages: fifteen hundred years of Japanese color terms

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Abstract

This paper describes the history of Japanese color naming and attempts to relate it to current models of color nomenclature research, particularly through Vantage Theory. I present evidence from early texts that reveals how this vocabulary might have operated 1500 years ago, and suggest a possible evolutionary sequence of Japanese color terminology from c. 400 C.E. to the present. I show how the Berlin and Kay standard model fails to account for some of this data. But the Japanese data do not necessary contradict the standard model so much as enrich it. What we are seeing is a very complex series of cognitive and social interactions, where color categories are in a state of flux. Color terms do not spontaneously generate, but are emergent and negotiated. And this, I argue, is based on speaker's vantages.

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1. Introduction

While Japanese was among the initial 20 languages examined by Berlin and Kay and their students some 30 years ago, the history of its color-term nomenclature system has yet to be fully described in formal terms either in English or Japanese. Not all the theoretical implications of the Japanese case for color nomenclature research have been fully explored, either. In this paper, I will examine the history of Japanese color naming and attempt to relate it to current models of color nomenclature research, both the “standard” model (Berlin and Kay, 1969, 1991) and what has come to be known as Vantage Theory (MacLaury, 1995, 2002).

I argue that a possible set of Japanese of “basic” color terms, indicated throughout the paper using CAPITAL LETTERS, is as follows:

1.	<i>shiro</i>	白	WHITE
2.	<i>kuro</i>	黒	BLACK
3.	<i>aka</i>	赤	RED

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4.	<i>ao</i>	青	BLUE
5.	<i>ki-iro</i>	黄色	YELLOW
6.	<i>midori</i>	緑	GREEN
7.	<i>cha-iro</i>	茶色	BROWN
8.	<i>murasaki</i>	紫	PURPLE
9.	<u><i>pinku</i></u>	ピンク	PINK
10.	<u><i>orenji</i></u>	オレンジ	ORANGE
11.	<i>hai-iro</i>	はいいろ	GREY
	<u><i>guree</i></u>	グレー	
12.	<i>kon-iro</i>	紺	[DARK-BLUE]

While this list has some intriguing elements – such as the presence of (the underlined) English loanwords, and a hypothesized DARK-BLUE basic term – even more interesting is how this inventory developed. I will offer evidence from several early texts that suggest how the Japanese color vocabulary system might have operated a millennium years ago, and suggest a possible developmental evolutionary sequence of Japanese color terminology from around 400 C.E. to the present. I will also offer evidence for why I believe that English loanwords are indeed now basic Japanese colors. I will present, too, reasons why it is likely that there might be a twelfth basic color in Japanese.¹

I demonstrate that the Berlin and Kay standard model fails to account for some critical aspects of this data. For example, Japanese historically developed into a five-term system, c. 500 C.E., from earlier categories of LIGHT/CLEAR, DARK, WARM/BRIGHT, and COOL/OPAQUE. These terms were WHITE, BLACK, RED, YELLOW, and GRUE. However, instead of the finding the next expected color terms in the Berlin and Kay sequence – such as BLUE or GREEN – *murasaki* (PURPLE) appears by 650 C.E., as does *momo* (PINK) by 750 C.E. Even the predicted BROWN term is not found for another 250 years. These are serious challenges to the standard model, which at present offers no explanation for such findings. I believe that other explanations, particularly as offered by Vantage Theory, give more robust accounts, and elucidate much of this data, succinctly and parsimoniously.

Besides offering further data for formal modeling, the Japanese case also offers at least two special advantages regarding the several attempts at refutation by those questioning the existence of color term universals. First, some doubt the efficacy of using any version of the formal standard model of color nomenclature because they cannot account for several anomalous cases (such as the early Japanese color term data presented here). Indeed, some critics, such as Saunders and van Brakel (1997), think it is too convenient that the evolutionary color term sequence is as parsimonious as it is. They believe that the 11 or 12 alleged basic color terms are either ad hoc at best or presumptions at worst, and represent little more than how Westerners, or those living in industrial societies, might experience the world. Japan, however, intentionally isolated itself until the mid-19th century, leaving a color vocabulary that developed with little outside influence – a rich source indeed. Others, such as Dedrick (1998), argue that the Berlin and Kay model is cognitively sterile. Secondly, formalists such as Cohen (2001) argue that ethnographic or historical undertakings are flawed because color sensations, being totally subjective, will never allow us to determine whether the color sensation of one

¹ English discussions of Japanese color terms can be found in Haarman (1989, pp. 190–218), Hinds (1974), Kobayashi (1998), McNeill (1972), Stanlaw (1987, 1997a, 2004, 2007), Tanaka and Koike (1982), and Uchikawa and Boynton (1987).

Japanese discussions on color history, culture, psychology, technology, gender, and aesthetics include Nagumo (2008), Ōmi (2008), Yoshioka (2002, 2007), Chijiwa (1987), Corona Books (2006), Hidaka (2003), Kawamoto (1978), Kobayashi (1974, 1981, 1984, 1990a,b), Matsuoka (1999), Nagata (2002), Ooka (1979), Ooka et al. (1980), Oyama (1994), Ozaki (2003), Shibugawa and Takahashi (1983a), Takimoto and Fujisawa (1977), and Yamanouchi (2001). *Nihon Shikisai Kenkyūjo* (1984) is a smaller, Japanese, version of the Munsell Book of Color. Approximations of the colors cited in the text can be viewed at HeartLand-Icho (2003) and Wa-shoku (2003). BG Japan (2000) is a film on the dying process of traditional Japanese colors. The Hepburn system of Romanization (Habein, 1984) has been used, and citations come from the following standard dictionaries: Arakawa (1977), Masuda (1974), and Shinmura (1998).

The most detailed discussions on color nomenclature theory can be found in four edited collections: MacLaury et al. (2007), Biggam and Kay (2006), Biggam and Pitchford (2006), and Hardin and Maffi (1997).

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