

## THE SEMANTIC FIELD OF COLOURS IN ARABIC<sup>1</sup>

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In memory of J.F.P. Hopkins  
A scholar, teacher and a friend

During my constant exploration of the Arabic dictionaries, I have come across many semantic phenomena with which most Arabists are perhaps familiar but which have generally been ignored or received little attention by scholars. The semantic field of colours in Arabic is one of these areas, although a few important works, such as Fischer's (1965) have been devoted to this subject.

The Arabic words denoting colours may, morphologically speaking, be divided into three main categories:

a) those which are formed by the pattern 'af'alu, like

'abyad - white, 'aswad - black, 'asfar - yellow,  
'ahdār - green, 'azraq - blue, 'asmar - grey, etc.

To this group one may add colours associated mainly with the body of man or animals such as:

'ahwar - having eyes with a marked contrast of white and black  
'ašhal - having bluish-black eyes  
'ašqar - having blonde or ginger/red hair  
'arqaṭ and 'abqa' - speckled, spotted  
'ablaq - piebald  
'aḡarr - having a blaze (horse)

and many more.

b) Colours which consist of Arabic nouns to which the yā' *an-nisba* has been added.

This, of course, allows, in principle, a countless number of possibilities. For example:

ramādī - grey, from *ramād* - ashes  
samā'ī or samāwī - sky blue, azure  
bunnī - coffee coloured, brown  
ḡahabī - golden  
fiddī - silvery  
'asālī - honey-coloured  
ḡinī - wheat-coloured  
kuḡlī - dark blue, navy blue

c) Foreign words which entered the Arabic lexicon in various stages usually in order to fill a gap. They basically denote shades not distinguished earlier by Arabic speakers, e.g.:

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of the paper presented at this Colloquium. Unfortunately, both versions were prepared in a great hurry and, therefore, some references known to the author have not been consulted (e.g. Fischer 1965). The author is hoping to prepare in the near future a more comprehensive study of this topic.

<i>wardī</i>	-	pink
<i>banafsagī</i>	-	violet
<i>samanḡūnī/samānḡūnī</i>	-	sky blue, azure (the Arabic equivalent is <i>samā'ī/samāwī</i> )
<i>burtuqālī</i>	-	orange
<i>'urḡuwānī</i>	-	maroon
<i>qirmizī</i>	-	red
<i>ḡawn</i>	-	white or black intermixed with red;

from here *ḡawna* one of the words for the sun, because, according to Lane, it becomes black or of a blackish colour tinged with red at setting.

Etymologically speaking, Arabic colours, at least in early or classical Arabic, prove the common theory about the development of colours in all languages. That is to say, the names of colours were limited and more general at the beginning, and gradually became more specific. Thus, early or classical Arabic usually refers to a limited number of colours, mainly based on the pattern *'afalu* which, in itself, represents a later development whereby most colours are formed by analogy in accordance with this mould.

However, perhaps the most striking fact regarding colours in classical Arabic is that most of them refer to more than one colour or shade. It is, therefore, evident that only at a later stage specific colour was associated with, or better to say, was confined to a certain word.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if in classical Arabic *'ahmar* means red, brown and white at a later stage its meaning was restricted to 'red'. *'ahdar* meant first green, dark, brownish and intensely black (like in the expressions *iḥḍarra l-layl* or *iḥḍarra šāribuhu* - the night or his moustache became black) but later it was confined to denote 'green' only. *'azraq* means, in classical Arabic, blue, azure, grey, greenish, and even white (like in the saying *zariqat 'aynuhu nahwf* - his eye turned towards me so that the white thereof appeared), but in a later stage it was understood to mean 'blue' only.

The reason for the colours being determined to denote a certain shade may be in that the colours became associated more and more with a certain object or objects for which the colours became modifiers, e.g. sky, sun, plants, etc. subsequently confining the colour to one specific word. However, it would be impossible to establish when exactly this process, which may be called the 'crystallisation of meanings' did, in fact, take place.

Exploration of the dictionaries shows also that the meanings for colours have developed, in the majority of the cases from homonyms or polysemic roots. Thus, the root *ḥ-m-r* has in addition to 'red' or 'redness' other derivatives such as:

<i>ḥamara</i>	-	to peel, to remove hair from the body, to suffer indigestion from eating barely and to become stupid. The last meaning is probably associated with the characters of <i>ḥimār</i> 'donkey'.
<i>'ahmara</i>	-	to have a white child born to him or her, i.e. <i>walad 'ahmar</i> .
<i>'ahmaru</i>	-	meaning 'white' can also be found in contrast to black in the idioms: <i>hu'itū 'ilā l-'ahmari wa-l-'aswadi</i> - I have been sent to the

<sup>2</sup> For comparison purposes the etymology of 'green' in English is linked with that of 'yellow' and the colour 'blue' is also linked with 'black' (Cf. Skeat's Etymological Dictionary of the English Language).

white and black peoples; or *'atānī kullu 'aswada minhum wa-'ahmara* - every Arab of them and a fornicer came to me; and *al-'ahmar wa-l-'abyaḍ* - the Arabs and the fornicers.

The root also gave birth to nouns such as *ḥumayra* 'measles', *yahmūr* 'fallow deer' and *ḥimār* 'donkey' and also to verbs such as *ḥammara* 'to roast'.

The root *ṣ-f-r* means, in addition to yellow, to whistle, whereas the root *z-r-q* also means to cast, to throw. The root *s-w-d* means also to rule, prevail, from which the word *sayyid* 'chief, master, lord' is derived.

Hence, since in some cases, no connection between the various meanings exists, we may assume that the roots are polysemic or homonymic. However, the distinction between the colours which had occurred already in classical Arabic has been retained in Modern Arabic, as well as the dialects. Perhaps the only example in modern Arabic of one word which still denotes two different colours is the word *'aṣṣar* which, in classical Arabic, meant 'intensely red' but which means today a blonde and ginger or red-headed.

To emphasize the intensity of the colours Arabic usually uses the word *gāmiq* for 'dark' and *fāṭih* for 'light'. However, classical Arabic has special adjectives for each colour utilised to denote dark shades, with the exception of blue and grey. Thus dark red is *'ahmar qānī* or *'ahmar qānin*; dark yellow is *'aṣfar fāqī*; dark green is *'ahḍar yānī* or *'ahḍar nāḍir*; dark black is *'aswad ḥālik* or *'aswad qātim* and pure white is *'abyaḍ nāṣī*.

Though I have not been able to find any explanation for the fact that *'azraq* and *'asmar* have no adjectives to express their intensity, a cursory look at the 'basic' meanings of the roots reveals that the roots refer to something negative, bodily defect or bad luck. Thus, we find that most of the words which mean 'blue' or 'grey' denote 'blindness': *zariqa* - was or became blind, whereas *kaḥala* and *samara* like *samala* mean to blind someone. *kuḥl* means also 'drought', 'barrenness' and 'hard year', whereas *kuḥayl* means 'tar'. Moreover, the words *nīla* and *munayyal* which denote 'blue', 'indigo' also mean, in certain dialects, a disaster or curse.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, since the word *zurq* appears in the Q 20,102 also in the sense of 'blindness': *wa-naḥṣuru l-muḡrimīna yawma 'idīn zurqan* 'we shall assemble the sinners on that day when they are blind' the reservation shown in Arabic towards the blue and grey may be understood, especially, if we add to this the superstition that the *gūl* is said to have blue eyes.<sup>4</sup>

Incidentally, it is not surprising that blue, grey and black, may carry negative connotations, since they sometimes symbolise in many cultures melancholy, disasters, mourning or death (e.g. blue devils, the blues, be black and blue, to go into black). Similarly, in the folklore of various cultures 'green' and 'yellow' usually denote 'envy'

<sup>3</sup> See Badawi-Hinds 1986:495, root N.Y.L.2.

<sup>4</sup> See Rodwell's translation of Q. 20,102, fn. 3. "The Arabians have a great aversion to blue and grey eyes as characteristic of their enemies the Greeks". See also e.g. Amīn (1953: 299) the entry *gūl*, in which this belief is recited and attested by a poem of an unknown poet. I am also most grateful to Professor Kees Versteegh for drawing my attention to Muḥammad al-Kalbi, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, MS Chester Beatty no. 4224 ff, ad Q. 55,41 where it says: *yūrafu l-muḡrimīna bi-ṣandḥum: al-muṣrikīna bi-sawḍ wuḡṭhīm wa-zurqat 'a'yūnihim* (the sinners are known for their features: the polytheists with their black face and blue eyes); identical statement in Muḡtīl, *Tafsīr* IV, 201.6-7.

or 'jealousy' ('the green-eyed god'), whereas 'white' in the Chinese culture symbolises mourning and death.

Nevertheless, we do find that Arabic may have contexts in which blue, grey and even black carry positive meanings; for example, a girl who is described as *samrā'* is usually taken to be beautiful, whereas a person who has *'aynāni sawdāwāni* or *'aynāni zarqāwāni* is regarded as handsome, and *'ayn kaḥlā'* is an eye that is black either by nature or by applying *kuḥl* to it. It would perhaps be worth mentioning in this context that 'green' is the favourite colour among many Muslims following the Hadith which tells us that it was the Prophet's most favourite colour.

The importance of colours in Arabic may be demonstrated by the fact that Arabic has devoted three verb forms, out of its sixteen or so, to colours. Thus, *if'alla*, *if'alla* and sometimes *if'aw'ala* denote that something has become or turned into the colour expressed by the root e.g. *iḥmarra* to become red, *iḥdārra* to become green, *izrawraqa* to become blue. The fact that most of the colours fit neatly these patterns suggests a late morpho-semantic development based on analogy, especially since other patterns such as *fa'ala* or *fa'ila* and *fa'ula* also occur in classical Arabic, e.g. *ḥadira* - to become green, and *ḥamira*, *ḥamura* - to become red.

So far as usage is concerned, colours in Arabic are used, apart from their basic denotations, as epithets, euphemisms and in idioms. As epithets, colours may usually refer to places, if they are in the singular, or to items or objects, if they are in the dual. Thus the epithet of Tunis is *al-ḥadrā'*; the city of Aleppo is *aš-šahbā'*; in Granada we find *al-ḥamrā'*; whereas Casablanca is *ad-dār al-bayḍā'*. These epithets may be used solely in reference to the place they describe without the proper name, through a process of elision which occurs with other nouns and adjectives.

Colours in the dual are rare and usually refer to two items expressed by one word, e.g. *al-'aḥmarānī* are flesh and wine, *al-'asfarānī* are gold and saffron, and *al-'abyadānī* are water and milk.

Opposite colours, usually *white* are used as euphemisms, e.g.

<i>'abū l-bayḍā'</i>	- the black man
<i>'abū l-ḡawn</i>	- the white man
<i>yawm 'abyaḍ</i>	- catastrophe
<i>ḥabar 'abyaḍ</i>	- in some dialects usually means 'bad news', 'disaster'. <sup>5</sup>

Other colours may also be used euphemistically, e.g. *al-hawā l-'aḥmar* is sexual intercourse, or *as-sarāya š-šafra'* is an insane asylum, and *al-mawt al-'aḥmar* is a massacre.

Colours may also appear in some idioms, where the colour is usually used as a metaphor, e.g. *'atā/qadā 'alā l-'aḥḍar wa-l-yābis* - to destroy completely. The word *'aḥḍar* refers here to all plants; *lam yusā'idnā li-zurqi/li-sawādi 'a'yūninā* - he did not help us for our blue/black eyes (but for a good reason). This idiom is undoubtedly a loan translation into Arabic.

To sum up this paper, we may conclude that the colours in Arabic have acquired their meanings through a process which may be described as 'synecdochical', that is to say, from the general meaning of a colour or a group of colours to a specific one.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Badawi-Hinds 1986:116, entry *'abyaḍ*.

Intensity of colours is mainly expressed in classical Arabic by special modifiers, whereas in modern Arabic the word *ġāmiq* 'dark' is more common. There are no, however, special modifiers to express light colours.

Arabic has also borrowed names for colours from foreign languages, mainly Persian. Those quite often, were not required, since Arabic had already had a similar colour, e.g. *'urġuwānī* which is not different from *'ahmar qānin/qāni* or *samaṅġīnī* which has an Arabic equivalent *samā'ī/samāwī*.

Finally, the colours of Arabic have a special importance which is reflected by their usages in daily expressions and idioms, to the extent that even in a simple daily greeting some Arabic dialects prefer the expression *'ēš lōnak* 'what is your colour?', i.e. how are you? to the expression *kayfa ḥāluk* or *zayyak* which are commonly used by other dialects.

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