

ENGLISH IDIOMS CONTAINING THE MEANING OF 'COLOR'

Nikulina O.L.

Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor,

Head of the English Department

National University "Odessa Maritime Academy"

Didrichson str., 8, Odessa, Ukraine

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5206-5998

Email: elnikulna55@gmail.com

Abstract. In the provisions of the scientific article the author analyses the transformation of the semantic meaning of the words, describing colors from the point of their neutral meaning to the point of their idiomatic meaning transformation in the contemporary English language. The author observed that while being used in the meaning of 'color', like 'the colors of rainbow' the words, depicting colors demonstrate neutral connotation, while the same 'color' words when entering an idiom may convey negative, positive or neutral connotation. We studied the meanings of the 'color' words relying on the contemporary British and American thesaurus dictionaries, dictionaries of slang and idioms. We also studied how words, depicting colors are used in maritime practice on board ship, where they perform not only the function of signs and directions but also help to avoid misunderstanding on the cultural level between seaman. The intercultural competency is crucial for seafarers that work in multinational crews, which is a common practice nowadays, because the false interpretation of the meanings of 'color' words may lead to drastic negative consequences that may endanger the life of people and cause emergency situations on board.

This article is the first attempt of tracing the semantic transformation of originally neutral meaning of ‘color’ words into their positive, negative or neutral connotations in colloquialisms or idioms. The article also presents the research of the ‘color’ words used in the marine domain, both in the professional usage and the intercultural communications.

We believe that the study presented in this article will be of scientific and practical use for the philologists and people working on ships.

Key words. The colors of the rainbow, the idioms with words of ‘colors’, neutral/positive/negative connotation, historical slang, ship caution signs, safety signs, prohibiting and allowing signs.

ENGLISH IDIOMS CONTAINING THE MEANING OF ‘COLOR’

The origin of contemporary English idioms containing the meaning of ‘color’ dates back to the common neutral meanings of colors as they were recognized by the human eye as the colors of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. With time people began associating the colors with their own emotions, prejudices, deeds and that is how the interrelation of colors with something good or bad appeared in the human speech. Hence in the language these associations with colors experienced the semantic transformation into positive, negative or neutral connotations in colloquialisms or idioms.

In our research we have observed that the transformation of the semantic meaning of the words, describing colors from the point of their neutral meaning to their idiomatic meaning in the contemporary English language has experienced the evolution of meaning from basically neutral to positive or negative. While being used in the meaning of ‘color’, like ‘the colors of rainbow’ the words, depicting colors demonstrate neutral connotation, while the same ‘color’ words when entering an idiom may convey negative, positive or neutral connotation. Sometimes the meaning of the ‘color’ words may be different in different languages. This fact is extremely

important in intercultural communication which is vital for people working in the multinational teams, like seamen from different countries working together in a mixed crew on board ship, where the internationally adopted marine language is English. We studied the meanings of the ‘color’ words relying on the contemporary British and American thesaurus dictionaries, dictionaries of slang and idioms. Also, we studied how words, depicting colors are used in maritime practice on board ship, where they perform not only the function of signs and directions but also help to avoid misunderstanding on the cultural level between seaman.

This article is the first attempt of tracing the semantic transformation of originally neutral meaning of ‘color’ words into their positive, negative or neutral connotations in colloquialisms or idioms. The article also presents the research of the ‘color’ words used in the marine domain, both in the professional usage and the intercultural communications.

In the previous articles [9-14] we have described the English and American idioms in various usages and meanings. In this article we investigate the idioms that contain the meaning of color. What is meant as ‘*color*’ in the language? They are special words that name different physical spectrum of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, dark blue and violet, - seven shades altogether. Compare:

‘*color*’ - a sensation experienced usually as a result of light of varying wavelengths reaching the eye; a pigment, an artist’s color [2, p. 193]; ‘*colour*’ (Br) – 1) the quality in objects which allows the eye to see the difference between (for example) a red flower and a blue flower when both are the same size and shape; 2) red, blue, green, yellow, white, etc. [3, p. 244] ; ‘*colour*’ – the appearance that things have that results from the way in which they reflect light; e.g., orange and green are colours. [6, p. 281].

Usually, the name of the colors in the language are neutral, but during the evolution people started associating some colors with something good or bad, like ‘white’ is associated with something good, e.g., *white bride dress*, *white lie*, *white lily* – purity; black – *black humor*, *funeral dresses*, *black Friday*, etc., and the opposition of the two colors in the expression ‘*black and white*’ is transparent.

When the names of colors are used in idiomatic expressions, they are also associated with something positive or negative. One can find the following definitions for the 'idiom': "an idiom can be defined as a number of words which, when taken together, have a different meaning from the individual meanings of each word" [1, p.13]; "a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words" [5, p. 740]; "a construction, expression, etc. having a meaning different from the literal one or not according to the usual patterns of the language" [2, p. 481]. As we can see, the main interpretation of 'idiom' in various dictionaries is about dubious nature of an idiom, where not one, but two meanings are present and read simultaneously.

We studied 44 idioms and differentiated their positive and negative meaning. The colors described were analyzed according to their frequency in idiomatic use: black, blue, red, green, white, grey. In this article we shall compare the neutral meanings of the words naming the colors with the transformed idiomatic meanings of the same words. We have based our study on the frequency list of idioms suggested in the English Idioms Dictionary and not on the succession of the colors usually presented in the rainbow. We also studied the meaning of the words depicting color in the language of signs, like safety colors used on board ship.

At the top of frequency list in idiomatic usage comes '**black**', but it is not the color of the rainbow. People use the word 'black' in the meaning of color, just think only of 'black clouds' or 'little black dress' from Coco Shannel. Let's see how the word is interpreted in the New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language: - '**black**' -without light, or not able to reflect it; colorless or so dark as to appear colorless.; not hopeful, angry, sullen, disapproving; very dirty; wicked [2; p. 100]. As we can see the negative connotation of the word '**black**' is prevailing. In the Dictionary of English Language and Culture – '**black**'; - the color of night, without light; a dark-skinned race, the Negro race; without milk or cream (coffee); - these may be treated as neutral connotation. The next entries will be definitely of negative connotation: - very bad, threatening, hopeless; full of anger, hate, or evil. '**Black**' is often thought of as the color of evil and death. People wear black clothes to show

grief at funerals [3, p. 113]. From the historical formation of slang point of view the word '**black**' entered many collocations, e.g., '**black and white**' - night, rhyming slang; written or printed, hence, binding; '**black art**' – an undertaker business; '**black-bird catching**' – the slave trade; '**in one's black books**' – out of favor; '**black diamond**' – a rough person, who is nevertheless very good or clever; '**the black gentleman**' – a devil; '**black mouth**' – a slanderer; [4, p. 76-78].

In the English Idioms Dictionary we found – 13 entries, out of which we encountered 11 idioms, the majority, with negative connotation, e.g. **black and blue** – having bruises on the body after an accident, fight, etc.; **a black day** (for someone/something) - an unhappy day when something bad or unhappy happens; **a black list** – a list of persons who are considered to be dangerous/undesirable/disloyal, etc.; **a black look** - a look of anger, dislike, resentment, etc.; **a/the black sheep** (of the family) – a person whose conduct is considered to be a disgrace to the family or the group. Compare with Russian 'белая ворона/паршивая овца'; **in someone's black books** – out of favor with someone. We found only 1 idiom with positive meaning, but it's not because of using 'black' in the positive sense, but because of using the particle 'not', e.g., **not as/so black as one/it is painted** – not as bad as people generally say or believe. We also encountered 1 idiom with a neutral meaning, e.g., **in black and white** – in writing or in print. [1, p.203-204].

From the historical point of view '**black**' was associated with: - a poacher working with a blackened face; '**black art**' – an undertaker business; '**black balling**' – stealing, pilfering, nautical. It originated on the old *Black Ball* line of steamers between Liverpool and New York : a line famous for the cruelty of its officers, the pilfering of its sailors.; '**black bird**' -a African captive aboard a slaver, nautical; '**black-bird catching**' – the slave trade, nautical; '**in one's black books**' – out of favor; '**black diamond**' – a rough person who is nevertheless very good or clever'; '**black gentleman**' – the devil; '**back leg**' – to boycott a fellow tailor, ; to return to work before a strike has been settled. [4, p. 76; p. 78]

On board ship the **black** color is not used.

Next in the list comes **'blue'**. This is the color of the rainbow, and let's see how the word is interpreted in the dictionaries cited above. In the New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language we find: **'blue'** – the color sensation stimulated by the wavelength of light in that portion of the spectrum between green and violet' [2, p.105.] This is the neutral connotation, but in the same dictionary we find somewhat transformed meaning, like 'unhappy, melancholy' [2, p. 105] , which is no doubt of negative connotation. In the Dictionary of English Language and Culture: **'blue'** is often thought of as a male color. Boy babies are given blue clothes, and girl babies, pink [3, p. 121]. From the historical formation of slang point of view the word **'blue'** entered many collocations, e.g., (of women) learned, literary; obscene, (perhaps from the blue dress of harlots); gloomy, low spirited [4, p. 88].

The word is pretty frequent in the idiomatic use. We found 12 entries in the English Idioms Dictionary [1, p. 204-205], out of which 8 are used with negative connotation, e.g. *a blue film/movie*, etc. –an obscene or pornographic film/movie, etc.; *a bolt from the blue* – a sudden (usually unpleasant surprise or shock; *once in a blue moon* –very rarely; *scream/ cry blue murder* – (informal) shout loudly and emotionally in disagreement, protest; make a lot of fuss; *till one is blue in the face* (with verbs such as talk, argue)– continuously or exhaustively but without results. There idioms were found with the positive connotation: *(have) blue blood* – be royal or aristocratic in origin; *a/the blue-eyed boy* – a man or boy who is somebody's favorite and with whom he can find no fault; *a true blue* (GB) – a loyal conservative with traditional views and values. One idiom we consider to be neutral: *disappear/vanish/go off into the blue* – go away suddenly, unexpectedly and without trace.

On board ship the **blue** color is used on caution tags, which are attached to machines and equipment, that should not be used, moved or started when repair work or maintenance is performed on them. Such equipment may be: whistle valve, steering wheel, engine controls. **Blue tags** are used on the deck when painting works of outer control boxes, electric davits, winches, and windlasses is being done.

The third on the list comes **'red'**. This is the color of the rainbow. In the New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language we find such meanings: 'the color sensation stimulated by the wavelength of light in that portion of the spectrum, ranging from orange to infrared being the color of blood flowing from the vein' [2, p. 835]. As we can judge, this represents the neutral connotation, just what platform the red color bears in the rainbow from the physical point of view.

In the Dictionary of English Language and Culture we found some more interesting entries: e.g., **red alert** – a condition of readiness to deal with a situation of sudden great danger; **red blood cell** – blood cells which carry oxygen to every part of the body (neutral); **red-blooded** – (of a person or their behavior) confident and strong (positive); **red-brick** – any of the British universities, started in the late 19th century in the cities outside London (neutral); **red card** – a piece of black card held out by the referee of a football match to show that a player should be sent off the field for carrying out foul (negative); **red carpet** – a special ceremonial welcome to an important guest, sometimes involving laying a red carpet on the ground for the guest to walk on (positive); **Red Crescent** – part of the international red Cross and Red Crescent movement whose aim is to offer protection and help to people, suffering as a result of wars, natural disasters, etc. its sign, a red crescent, is recognized under Geneva conventions and protects the people using it for being attacked or harmed (neutral); **Red Cross** - part of the international ed Cross and Red Crescent movement whose aim is to offer protection and help to people, suffering as a result of wars, natural disasters, etc. its sign, a red crescent, is recognized under Geneva conventions and protects the people using it for being attacked or harmed (neutral), [3, p. 1099].

From the historical formation of slang point of view the word **'red'** entered many collocations, e.g., - the port side of a ship; it shows a red light (neutral); **paint the town red** – to have a riotously good time (positive); **red beard** – a watchman or constable (neutral); **red clock** – a gold watch (positive); **red cross** – an English ship (neutral); **red flag in the mast-head** – in dead earnest, (naval Coll); **red heart** – rum (neutral); **red herring** – a soldier (negative); **red-hot treat** – an extremely dangerous

person (negative); *red lamp* – a brothel (negative); *red stuff* – gold articles (positive). [4, p. 759, 760].

Let's see what the word '*red*' means in the idiomatic sense. We found 8 entries in the English Idioms Dictionary altogether in [1, p. 205], out of which 6 are used with negative connotation, e.g., *be/go/turn red as a beetroot* – go red in the face with embarrassment or anger. Compare with Russian 'покраснеть как рак'; *be in the red* – have no money in one's bank account, owe money to the bank; *catch someone/be caught red-handed* – in the act of doing something secretive or criminal; *a red herring* – an unimportant or irrelevant matter which is introduced into a discussion to divert attention from the main subject, the truth, etc.; *red tape* – official, bureaucratic formalities and procedures that slow down people and processes; *see red* – suddenly become very angry, lose one's temper. Two idioms represent positive connotation: e.g., *the red carpet* – a sign of special welcome or attention to an important visitor; *a red-letter day* – an important or joyful occasion which one looks forward to or remembers with pleasure.

On board ship the *red* color is used to mark the location of fire-fighting equipment: the red background on the bulkhead shows the location of fire extinguishers, racks and reels for fire hoses: hose connection: the alarm stations: fire main valves/fire hydrants; fire pumps; fire axes, buckets. Compare with the street light color, which means alert'.

The fourth on the list comes '*green*'. This is the color of the rainbow. In the New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language we find such meanings: 'the color sensation stimulated by the wavelength of light in that portion of the spectrum, between blue and yellow, being the color of emeralds, grass, leaves. [2, p. 420]. The given examples represent the neutral meaning of the word. In the same dictionary some other connotations are given, like: 'sickly complexion from fear, not ripe or mature, young, fresh' [2. p. 420]. In the dictionary of English Language and Culture we found such entries with the word '*green*: - concerned with or not causing harm to, the environment; unhealthy pale in the face because of sickness, fear; young and inexperienced, easily deceived and ready to believe anything; very jealous; *green*

card - (Am E) a document necessary in order to work legally in the US; **green cross code** – (Br E) a set of rules for children of how to cross the roads safely; **green fingers** – natural skill in making plants grow well; **greenhouse effect** – the gradual slight warming of the air surrounding the Earth because heat cannot escape through its upper layers, said to be caused by pollution. [3, p.676].

From the historical formation of slang point of view the word ‘**green**’ entered many collocations, e.g., **green apron** – a lay preacher; **green as duckweed** – extremely simple or foolish; **green as I’m cabbage-looking** – not such a fool as I appear to be; **green bag** – a layer, from the color of the brief-bag; **have/ wear a green bonnet** – to go bankrupt; **green cloth**- a billiard table; **green rag** – the curtain in the theater. [4, 400].

We found 5 entries of the word ‘green’ in the English Idioms Dictionary, out of which 2 idioms convey negative connotation, e.g., **be green** (informal) be too trusting, naïve and easily deceived through lack of experience; **green with envy** (often be/go/ turn/make someone – extremely envious of someone or something. 2 idioms convey positive connotation, e.g.; **give someone/get the green light** – give/get approval or permission to start doing something. Compare with Russian ‘дать зеленый свет’; **have/got green fingers** – be good at gardening, looking after plants, etc. one idiom with ‘green’ represent neutral meaning, e.g., **a green belt** – an area of fields and woodlands. [1, p. 205].

On board ship the **green** color is used to indicate the location of safety devices and first aid devices. **Green Cross** may show the location of first aid supplies. and medical cabinet may all be painted green, also: life rings, hospital, stretchers, boxes for respirators, gas masks are marked in green. Green color is also attached to life boat stations, releasing gear handle in life boats and alarm buttons. Compare with street lights, where green means ‘permission to proceed’.

The fifth on the list comes ‘**white**’. It is not the color of the rainbow. People use the word ‘white’ in the meaning of color, just think only of white dress or white chalk. The word is interpreted in the New Webster’s Dictionary and Thesaurus of the

English Language as the color sensation stimulated by a combination of all the wavelengths of visible light, being the color of milk, grey hair, very blond. We found 4 entries in the English Idioms Dictionary, out of which 2 idioms convey positive connotation, e.g., *a white-collar worker/job*, etc. – a non-manual worker, e.g., office worker/professional or business work; *a (little) white lie* – a lie which does no harm and is more polite than the truth, usually told to spare someone's feelings or for convenience. One idiom bears negative connotation, e.g., *as white as a sheet/ghost* – very pale because of fear, shock. Compare with Russian 'побелеть как полотно'. One idiom with 'white' suggests the neutral meaning, e.g., *white coffee* – coffee with milk or cream.

On board ship the *white* color is used to indicate the overall dimensions of comings on tween decks.

The sixth on the list comes '*grey*', which is not the color of the rainbow. People use this color to indicate the color between white and black, which is the neutral connotation, but later in the same dictionary they mention the meanings: 'overcast or gloomy, like '*a grey day*' -depressing or cheerless, which we consider to convey a negative connotation. In the English Idioms Dictionary, we found only two entries, out of which 1 idiom conveys positive connotation, e.g., '*grey matter*' – one's brain, intelligence, power of reasoning, etc.; another idiom is of neutral meaning, e.g., *go/turn grey* – become grey-haired.

On board ship the *grey* color is not used.

The word '*yellow*' is not included in the English Idioms Dictionary. In the New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language we find such meanings: 'the color sensation stimulated by the wavelength of light in that portion of the spectrum, between orange and green e.g., ripe lemons, old skin [1, p. 1141]. In his meaning the word is definitely neutral. Although it was not included in the English Idioms Dictionary, we found some examples of the idiomatic meaning of the word '*yellow*' the same Webster's Dictionary : cowardly, full of sensation (of a newspaper) [1, p. 1141]; the color '*yellow*' is associated with cowardice, but sometimes the same word may be used in the positive connotation, like: *yellow brick road* – a road which

leads to a place where a person can find something good; the same word may be used in the neutral meaning, like: *yellow pages* – a book which contains telephone numbers and addresses of firms and similar organizations in the area, divided up according to the kind of businesses they do [1, p. 1522].

On board ship the *yellow* color is used to indicate dangers which may cause falling, tripping, stumbling, striking against something. Such obstacles on board ship may be gangway/ladder steps, edge of platform, deck load lashings, padeyes, sills, overheads, control boxes, ventilators and other projections to passageways; cargo hooks, edge of hawses, valve wheels and everything that comes over floor plates in the engine room. Compare with the street light color, which means ‘attention’.

The word ‘*orange*’ is the color of the rainbow, but is not included in the English Idioms Dictionary. In the New Webster’s Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language we find such meanings: ‘the reddish-yellow, globous fruit of citrus family [2, p. 705].

On board ship the *orange* color is used to indicate the dangerous parts of machines and equipment and inside guards and covers. Those may be inner surfaces of the switch box covers and fuse panels; hand cranks, exposed shaft ends, gipsy heads, lower part of snatch blocks, door jambs at about eye level, to warn of a danger in case you rest your hands or fingers against them; dangerous moving parts of machinery.

The word *violet/purple* as a color of the rainbow is described as ‘violet - bluish-purple color’ as that of a flower [5, p.1642]; ‘purple - having the color of blue and red mixed together’ [5, p.1180]; ‘purple - a composite deep color of red and blue [2, p.811].

In the idiomatic usage we found the expression ‘*shrinking violet*’ meaning ‘a negative term for a very shy person’ (6), ‘an extremely shy person’ (7). This metaphoric idiom refers to a flower, but the precise allusion is unclear, since violets thrive under a variety of conditions and often are considered a garden weed. ‘*Purple*’ is also found in the idiomatic sense, e.g., ‘*born in the purple*’ – born into a royal family; ‘*purple patch*’ – period of success or good luck; ‘*purple heart*’ – a military

decoration for bravery; '*purple prose*' – overly ornate or flowery language; '*purple haze*' - a state of confusion or euphoria.

From the historical formation of slang point of view the word '*violet*' means a 'garden violet, an onion' [4, p. 1022]; the word '*purple*' means 'glorious, royal [4, p. 735].

On board ship the *violet/purple* color is not used.

In the conclusion we would like to say that the pallet of color words is very frequently and successfully used in the modern idiomatic language and professional maritime language. While expressing neutral connotation when naming the colors of light and things, in the idiomatic usage such words may express different connotations, - negative, positive and neutral.

The object of the article was to study the transformation of the semantic meaning of the words, describing colors from the point of their neutral meaning to their idiomatic meaning in the contemporary English language. During the research we analyzed the selected idioms from the point of view of their performance as positive, negative or neutral descriptives when being used in contemporary British and American colloquial language. Also, the practical usage of words meaning colors in the marine application on board ship was described and analyzed.

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