

## COLOURS' IDIOMS AND EXPRESSIONS USED IN TOURISM AND TRAVELLING VOCABULARY

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*Abstract: This paper attempts to bring a fresh approach upon the symbolic connotation of colours as they are reflected in tourism and travelling vocabulary. I have chosen the semantic field of colours because they are very frequently used especially to convey certain meanings. In order to broaden our insight into the cognitive motivations behind colour idiomatic phrases and expressions we referred to a wide range of sources. Miscellaneous information will be collated from both academic and non-academic sources, travelling reviews and blogs, folk beliefs or social media.*

*Keywords: idioms, travelling vocabulary, tourism.*

### 1. What is an Idiom?

From the very beginning the term idiom poses many problems when trying to define it as it can refer to numerous aspects and concepts. Its multiple interpretations encompass as little of a language, if not the whole language itself.

According to Kovecses and Szabo<sup>1</sup> “the category of idioms is a mixed bag. It involves metaphors (e.g.: *to spill the beans*) metonymies (e.g.: *throw up one's hands*) pairs of words (e.g.: *cats and dogs*), idioms with “it” (e.g.: *to live it up*) similes (e.g.: *as easy as a pie*) sayings (e.g.: “*first come, first served*”) phrasal verbs (e.g.: “*come up*” as in “*Christmas is coming up*”), grammatical idioms (e.g.: *let alone*).

Idiom definitions by linguistics working within various traditions reflect that part of the standard dictionary definitions which is centred upon the impossibility of interpreting the whole in terms of known meanings of the parts.

**Idiom (...)** 1. an expression whose meaning is different from the meaning of the parts (Medal, 2002, p. 710).

**Idiom (...)** 2. a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word (LDCE, 2009, p. 870).

As shown above, researchers have encountered countless difficulties in the field of idiomatic language when trying to sort out categories or make clear-cut distinctions.

There are some idiomatic phrases which are more easily understandable than others or more readily available to speakers. This aspect led to considerations on what has become known as degrees of idiomacity/ transparency/ opaqueness of phrases.

The following part will provide a practical analysis of colour idiomatic phrases in language used in travelling and tourism and will focus on two main aspects functional and cognitive.

### 2. Functional and Cognitive Aspects

In this part we shall conduct a functional analysis of colours idioms and idiomatic expressions as extracted from dictionaries, blogs, online materials, social media, TV,

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<sup>1</sup> Kovecses Z. & Szabo P.(1996): A View from Cognitive Semantics, Applied Linguistics, vol. 17, p. 326-327

newspapers, etc. These are to be understood in the broadest sense, as an umbrella label for all expressions in our corpus, when the discussion is not focused on the linguistic distinctions among them but on their interplay with real life issues.

Our corpus is composed of entries which would be generally accepted as a pure idioms (*white elephant, red herring, etc.*), collocations (*red meat, white coffee*) from phrasal verbs (*brown someone off*) to formulaic language (*something old, something new, something borrowed, etc.*) or sayings (*the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, etc.*).

Fernando<sup>2</sup> states that broadly speaking idioms could submit to three classes: *pure idioms, semi-idioms and literal idioms*. According to her a pure idiom is a type of conventionalized, non-literal multi-word expression in which none of the constituents has a literal meaning: *red-eye special, white-elephant, brown nose, etc.*

A semi-idiom has one or more literal constituents: *black day for travelling, a blue joke (about travelling), white night, white Christmas, etc.*

Literal idioms show in variance or restricted variation, but there are less semantically complex than pure idioms or semi-idioms. Some examples for this category would be: *on foot, dark and handsome, merry Christmas, etc.*

To apply the degree of transparency or opacity they exhibit to our corpus we think that expressions: as **black** as coal/ ink, as white as snow, **black and blue** (bruised, beaten) grey backpackers (derogatory sense for old people who are travelling) are semi-transparent idioms.

Semi-opaque phrases may include the following examples: *the black hole of Calcutta* (a dark, unpleasantly hot and stuffy building or a place with a few amenities), *to paint the town red* (to enjoy a lively/ boisterous time in public places, often causing disturbance to other people), *a red-letter day* (a day especially looked forward to/ or remembered).

Opaque phrases are pure idioms in which no constituent has a literal meaning. Though not numerous, this sort of expressions are easily identifiable, even in our corpus: *black Maria (police van), to be in a brown study (to be in a distracted state of mind, unaware of one's surroundings, etc.)*.

As it can be easily noticed in the case of these pure or opaque idioms, there is no visible connection between the meanings of the elements they comprise and the overall significance of the expressions.

It is obvious that colour symbolism (which is also reflected in language) is built and it is, also reflected on the humans visual associations with objects and phenomena which themselves bear that colour as specific and eye-catching (e.g.; sky is blue, blood is red, snow is white, etc.)

## BLACK

Encompassing various meanings undoubtedly **black** is powerful with mainly negative connotations. In the western civilisation black is the sombre colour of sorrow and mourning, associated with death, fear, unhappiness, sadness, remorse and anger.

*blacked out- not available*

*black out dates-dates when travel rewards and other special discounts/promotions are not available*

*black run- an extremely difficult run, suitable for experts skiers*

<sup>2</sup> Fernando C. – Idioms and Idiomacity, Oxford University Press, 1996

*to paint a place all **black**- to describe it as all bad*  
***black** box- a small machine that records information about an aircraft during its flight, used to discover the cause of an accident*  
***black** belt- a very fertile area, piece of land*  
***black** Africa-the part of Africa south of the Sahara Desert*  
***black-water** rafting-riding inner tubes or other inflatables on rivers that run into or through caves*

## BLUE

The colour of the sky and the ocean, blue is prevailing colour in our lives.

According to K. Smith<sup>3</sup> it is the collection colour of the spirit, invoking rest, being trustworthy and dependable. Blue can symbolize peace, calm, stability, security, loyalty, the sky, the water, but also the depression. It seems to be the favourite colour world-wide and it is often used in products to promote cleanliness and purity. For instance, the Blue Flag is a classification by FEEA<sup>4</sup> for standards such as quality, safety, environmental education and information and general environmental management criteria.

**Blue Flag Award-** is a certification by the Foundation for Environmental Education(FEE)that a beach, marina, or sustainable boating tourism operator meets its stringent standards.

**blue hour** -the period just before sunrise or after sunset, when indirect sunlight is evenly diffused

**blue room (slang)**-the lavatory on an aircraft

**blue train-** a luxury train service in South Africa

## BROWN

It is the colour of the earth and is abundant in nature. According to K. Smith it is associated with all things that are natural or organic ( companies use brown paper to denote a natural product ). Brown, also, represents the ideas of hearth, home and comfort. These are the perfect ingredients in tourism .

**as brown as a berry-** / (about a person) very suntanned

**to brownbag** (food)- to eat food brought from home

## GREEN

Alongside with blue and brown green is another colour highly pervasive in the natural world. It is the colour of plant life of spring, of nature; in general thus it is regarded as the symbol of fertility and regeneration, youth and vigour. Moreover, it is used worldwide representing safety.

**green hotel-** a lodging establishment that has made a commitment to various ecologically sound practices such as saving water, saving energy, and reducing solid waste

**green key-** in the hotel industry, a credit-card-sized room key made of recycled materials. Some green keys are also biodegradable.

**Greenland-** an island country between the Arctic and Atlantic Ocean.

**red and green-** a system used by customs in which passengers with nothing to declare follow the green symbols, while passengers with dutiable items to declare follow the red symbols through the customs area

**green** back– any denomination of US dollar

<sup>3</sup> Smith, L.P ( 1925) – Words and Idioms, London: Constable &Company.

<sup>4</sup> Foundation for Environmental Education

**green sheet**- a document put out by the centres for Disease Control and used by travel agents listing summaries of cruise ships inspections and the performances of specific ships.  
**to be a green option**- to be environmentally friendly

#### PINK

At present, pink is considered a romantic colour, recalling tender love. A pink triangle is frequently used to represent gays, lesbians and bisexuals. In the western culture, it means sentimentality and lack of full virility.

in the **pink**-in good health

#### ORANGE

Orange, a close relative of red is regarded as representing energy, warmth, enthusiasm, flamboyance, etc. As one of the colours which really stands out even at a distance, orange is used to set things apart from their surroundings. Safety orange is the colour usually used in the world for traffic cones, stanchions, barrels and other construction zone devices.

#### GREY

K. Smith<sup>5</sup> argues it is the colour of intellect, knowledge, reliability and wisdom. It is also a conservative colour carrying authority. The negative connotations of grey/ silver refer to the old age, sadness, boredom and pessimism.

**grey nomads**-a retired couple who spends their time travelling in a caravan  
**grey/ beige hotel**- a very unattractive hotel

#### WHITE

It is seen as a sacred and pure colour, it projects purity, reverence, simplicity, kindness, cleanliness and neutrality. In the Bible, white represents the colour of light and it is the emblem of divine, in Christianity a white lily represents the Madonna. In general, white is the colour associated with what is sacred and purity.

Nowadays, white is conventional colour worn by doctors and health professionals, as an emblem of cleanliness especially in hospitality industry.

**white bread** - plain, tasteless, boring, lame

**white elephant** - something that has cost a lot of money but has no useful purpose

**white glove services**- marked by special care or attention

**white lightning**- moonshine

**white-knuckle flyer (slang)**- a person nervous about flying

**white water**- fast shallow stretches of water in a river

**white water rafting** - recreational outdoor activity which use an inflatable raft to navigate a river or other body of water

#### RED

It is another prominent colour in terms of symbolic value. Red is naturally the colour of blood and fire, therefore K. Smith does not find it surprisingly red denotes life and action, excitement, energy, speed, strength but also danger, passion or aggression. In the colour-coded threat system, red is the colour that means severe, because of its visibility, stop signs, stop lights, brake lights or fire equipment are all painted red. Similarly, in the financial arena red symbolises a negative direction ( being in debt).

**red and green**- a system used by customs in which passengers with nothing to declare follow the green symbols, while passengers with dutiable items to declare follow the red symbols through the customs area

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, L.P ( 1925) – Words and Idioms, London: Constable &Company.

**Red Book** (*slang*)- any restaurant and hotel guide published by Michelin, so called because of its colour and to distinguish these guides from Michelin's tourism guides, which have green covers

**red as a lobster**- bright red due to sunburnt

**red-light district**- district of brothels or of places of entertainment for adults

**red-neck** ( Amer. E)-southerner known for his red neck presumably working /staying in the sun

**red-eye special** -long haul flights which are associated with the state of tiredness they induce, causing the eyes to become injected

**red tape** (when applying for a visa)- bureaucracy

**red tide/ Mahogany tide**-a discolouring effect caused by the explosive growth of certain forms of phytoplankton that turns coastal waters in an unsightly shade of brownish red.

### **YELLOW/ GOLDEN**

Yellow is the colour of the sun and gold and therefore, it is plenty used in tourism and travelling vocabulary. It has been equated with light, optimism, idealism, joy, good spirits and exhilaration, happiness and enlightenment. Presently, yellow is largely used to signal hazard. K Smith explains that yellow has a good visibility (actually it is considered the most difficult colour for the eye to take in and can be used overpowering if overused. It is also, a symbol for guaranteed area marked off because of danger.

**golden hours**- the period of time short after sunrise or before sunset

**Golden Triangle**- this is the name of a part of Asia that covers Where Thailand, Laos and Myanmar meet.

**yellow glow**- brightness and warmth attracting those looking for joy and light

**golden hour**- the period of daytime shortly after sunrise or before sunset, during which daylight is redder and softer than when the Sun is higher in the sky.

### Conclusion:

Idioms emerge from a natural tendency of the human mind to violate rational rules for the sake of entertainment. They are flights of the human imagination and idiomatic expressions often show no regard for irrelevance and appropriateness as they focus on charm and authenticity. Our practical analysis shows the language is alive and jocular. The idea occurred to us while lecturing idioms and idiomatic expressions in tourism and holiday vocabulary. There is an interested audience eager to share their personal experiences with colours on real-life situations.

According to G. Leech<sup>6</sup> : „, there are two distinct modes of English – thoughtful , accurate and more formal, reflected mostly by written English; and spontaneous, real-life English”. Therefore, learning a language can be exciting, but also sometimes difficult and frustrating because there are so many things to learn and it is difficult to know what to focus on.

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<sup>6</sup> Professor Geoffrey Leech, Emeritus Professor of English Language and Linguistics- University of Lancaster

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