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## CONNOTATIVE MEANINGS OF COLOR IN ALGERIAN CULTURE: CASE STUDY OF RED AND YELLOW

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the connotative meanings of the color terms “red” and “yellow” in Algerian culture from a pragmatic perspective. The study aims to explore the different connotative representations that these colors can acquire in various contexts. The data for this study were primarily obtained from Algerian newspapers, TV series, and social media posts. To pinpoint the accuracy of the analysis, a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaire was distributed among male and female Algerian students at Jordan University. The DCT comprised 12 situations, with six for each color, and participants were required to determine the appropriate meaning in each situation. The collected data was then analyzed qualitatively in detail. The results have shown that while the red color in Algerian culture has both positive and negative connotations, yellow always bears a negative connotation. These findings provide valuable insights into the cultural associations and symbolism of these colors in Algerian society, which can be relevant for professionals in fields such as marketing, advertising, and international business to enhance their cross-cultural communication and understanding.

**Keywords:** color connotation, Algerian culture, pragmatics, cultural symbolism, Discourse Completion Task (DCT), red, yellow, cross-cultural communication.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a uniquely human system of communication that billions of people around the world share. With over 6000 spoken languages in existence, it's clear that while there are differences between them, similarities also exist. Despite debates about the universality of language, linguist Noam Chomsky's theories on Universal Grammar have advanced cross-linguistic inquiry [Cook & Newson, 2007]. However, language cannot be studied in isolation from the

society and culture that shape it. An example of how culture affects language can be seen in the notion of connotation. While color is universal in that all languages have words for it, the meanings of colors can differ across languages and cultures.

The study of connotative meanings of colors has inspired many researchers up to the present day. Connotations link linguistics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics studies, i.e. language and culture. The Oxford Dictionary defines connotation as “an idea or a feeling that a word invokes for a person besides its literal meaning” [Oxford English Dictionary]. In other words, the implicit meaning of a particular word can be altered due to various reasons like culture, for instance.

Ghazala [1995] suggested that connotation is a “combination of two or more words that always occur together consistently in a different context in languages”. Another definition was proposed by Sag et al. [2007] in which the connotation is “syntactically and semantically compositional, but statistically idiomatic”. Concerning the latter assumptions, colors are the best examples of words that evoke connotative meaning.

Colors are universal in that, across all cultures, there exist words/expressions that denote colors; however, the meaning of the colour terms may differ from one language to another. Studies on this subject concluded that culture plays a crucial role in determining different definitions of a particular color. The most common example is that of black and white, thus, in China, for instance, the color white is used to depict obsequies, whereas in the West (Europe and the USA) they use the color black to denote the same thing. The notion that language and culture are closely related gave rise to cross-cultural studies in which researchers studied various words and expressions across different languages and cultures and tried to establish the differences and the main reasons behind them.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The connection between language and culture is reflected in identity, where different languages mirror different cultures. This difference can be noted even on the local level; speakers sharing the same language might interpret particular words/expressions differently. For instance, Adams & Osgood [1973] compared the connotative structure of the color terms *black*, *white*, *grey*, *red*, *yellow*, *green*, and *blue* in English and 23 other languages. Results showed that the color *white* always has a positive connotation across all the languages studied. *Red* was found to occupy a relatively neutral point, while yellow tends to be positively evaluated across languages.

Saito [1996] and Hemphill [1996] investigated the emotional responses to colors, including *white*, *pink*, *red*, *yellow*, *blue*, *purple*, *green*, *black*, and *grey*. The researchers found that brighter colors like *white*, *red*, *pink*, and *green* evoke positive responses. This latter comprises feelings like happiness, excitement, relaxation, and being positive. On the other hand, darker colors, such as *black* and *grey*, evoke anxiety, boredom, sadness, and negative responses. Other researchers later verified such findings [Kaya – Epps, 2004; Meier et al., 2004; Elliot & Maier, 2007].

Although scarce, some studies on the connotative meanings of color terms in the Arabic language are worth mentioning. Al-Adaileh [2012] examined the X-phemistic uses of colour terms in Jordanian Arabic, including *black*, *white*, *yellow*, *red*, *green*, and *blue*. The data analysis revealed that colors have many orthophemistic connotations (straight-talking), and dysphemistic connotations (offensive language) of the studied colors than euphemistic ones (sweet-talking). It was also found that the uses of *black*, *yellow*, *red*, and *blue* are predominantly dysphemistic. In contrast, *white* mostly has positive connotations, but *green* is associated with euphemistic and dysphemistic connotations.

The present research hopes to add to the limited literature on this topic, especially in Arabic. The researcher believes that the present paper is the first attempt to explore the connotative meanings of colors in the context of Algerian Arabic.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

For this study, data were primarily sourced from Algerian newspapers, TV series, and social media posts. The researcher also collaborated with colleagues and enlisted the help of friends to gather additional insights and validate interpretations of the connotations of the words under examination.

As for newspapers, we detected the use of color terms in two Algerian electronic newspapers, *Enahar* and *Echorouk*. We chose these particular newspapers because of their large fan base as they have approximately more than 1 million daily readers. Secondly, it is due to the style of writing as editors of these newspapers often allow expressions in informal Arabic to draw the reader's attention, which is very helpful for our study.

Then the researcher summarized the findings in a DCT distributed among 40 Algerian university students. This task aimed to pinpoint whether or not the different connotative meanings were shared among the speech community. The answers were accepted in informal language to make the data collection environment stress-free and as naturalistic as possible.

The researcher proposed twelve situations where each color item was put in six different scenarios. In each case, the color acquires a new meaning different from the previous context. The participants were required to identify and describe the meanings of the term based on its context and their background knowledge and experience. The colors examined in this study were selected because they are frequently used in daily interactions.

For the present study, a random sample of 40 Algerians between the ages of 23 and 28 was selected, with 20 male and 20 female participants. All participants were Ph.D. students at Jordan University, studying a variety of fields such as Mathematics, English, and Food Science. The sample was primarily aimed at younger individuals, as they tend to use the language in question more frequently, and were also more accessible to the researcher.

### 4. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In this section, we aim to address the earlier question regarding the connotative meanings of the colors red and yellow in Algerian culture. Each situation will be examined to determine the connotations associated with each term. As such, this section will be divided into two parts, with each focusing on one of the colors - red and yellow. It is worth noting that the situations presented in the DCT questionnaire were in Algerian Arabic, and therefore literal and phonetic transliterations will be utilized to maintain the meaning of the expressions. The following list depicts major phonological symbols of Arabic which do not have equivalent sounds in the English language:

ħ: ح x: خ ʕ: ع

#### 4.1. Red Color

The analysis of data collected while conducting this research shows surprising results. After reading participants' answers from different cultural backgrounds, we found that *red* in Algerian culture may convey a negative meaning. Algerians use a set of colors in their speech to express a

certain emotional or physical state and other characteristics related to nature. The red color in the Algerian culture denotes distinct meanings. On the one hand, it carries positive connotations, as Tao [1994] states. For example, the red color symbolizes love and passion. Consider the following Algerian expression:

**1.** /allah *jeħamar* wadzehak ja waldi: /

May Allah help you to succeed, my son/daughter.

In Situation 1, the red colour is used to wish success to someone. Usually, it is used by older people towards younger ones. In this example, a father/mother is talking to his or her son/daughter, and using “red face” has a positive connotation. In this context, “a red face” is similar to “may Allah bless you” or “may Allah bring joy to you”. Another positive connotation of the color red in this situation is the reflection of the parents’ satisfaction as their children made them proud.

**2.** /cheft walid ki rdzaħ *ħamar* baħd ma saqsaweh 3la xati:btah /

Have you seen Walid’s red face when he asked him about his fiancé?

In Situation 2, we have two friends talking about their acquaintance. The word *red*, in this context, can have two opposite meanings (connotations). First, it can be used as a sign that the person is shy. It is almost universal that shyness is reflected by redness on a person’s face (cheek). However, red in this situation may convey the meaning of anger in certain situations. Getting into people’s personal lives is impolite and often makes others uncomfortable. This latter can be expressed in different ways, such as being angry. It is also known that a red face indicates anger, which is reflected in cartoons, for instance, the famous “Tom and Jerry”.

**3.** / nedzi lik *nħamar* lik wadzhak /

I will come and make your face red.

In Situation 3, we examine another connotative meaning of the red color. This situation reflects a case of intimidation where the speaker threatens the hearer. In this context, associating a face with the red color has a negative inference. The red color denotes that the speaker will harm the hearer, suggesting he will hit him in the face.

**4.** / kayn ġibad ġinhom *ħamra*: /

There are some people who have a red eye

In Situation 4, we examine another example of a negative connotation of the color red. In this context, the speaker assigns *red* to another body part rather than the face (eye). In this sense, *red* acquires the meaning of someone envious. This expression has the English equivalent: “green-eyed person”.

**5.** / charaj 3ino *ħamra* /

The buyer has a red eye.

In Situation 5, we have a description of the color red with a positive connotation. This is a common idiom or an established saying used among traders to depict the perfect customer. A good client buys. Therefore, *the red eye* refers to the shopper’s intention to purchase goods. In a nutshell, a red-eyed buyer is a person who purchases without hesitation or bargaining. Sometimes, this expression is used as an inference and a strategy to provoke the customer.

**6.** / *eldhalem axertu: mu:t ħamra* /

The oppressor will have red death

In Situation 6, another negative connotative meaning of *red* can be observed. Similar to the previous example, we consider another type of an Algerian-established saying. In this context, *red* is associated with death. It is used to depict the severe consequences a wrongdoer (oppressor) will face in the afterlife, starting with having a terrible end. *Red death* is a metaphorical expression used to prevent people from being bad to each other.

## 4.2. Yellow Color

The yellow color is widely used in Algerian speech. Generally, it conveys negative connotations in the Algerian culture, such as sickness, evil-full matters, and harm. Hence, we turn to detail the different connotations reflected in each of the six situations.

**7.** / *hadi dahka sfra tašk wašra bzaf* /

This yellow smile of yours is so dangerous.

Situation 7 depicts an interaction between two acquaintances where the speaker describes the hearer. In this context, the color yellow characterizes the act of smiling. It is important to mention that such manifestation negatively affects Algerian culture. This expression is used to mark the act as devilish and evil-full, i.e. “a person with a yellow smile” means that he/she has done something bad and he/she is hiding it or intends to do something bad.

**8.** / *hadik msfara hija li hadret fik* /

That yellow girl is the one who stubbed you on your back

In Situation 8 *yellow* is used as an adjective to describe a person. In Algerian culture, calling someone yellow is related to their physical appearance or personality. In both contexts, the color depicts a negative connotation. While the former may be interpreted as an illness or jadedness, the latter can be explained as a bad person. In this context, someone has stubbed their friend in the back; therefore, he/she is referred to as a bad “yellow” person.

**9.** / *ljom feft dzarkom wedzho kan sfar* /

Today, I saw your neighbor, and his face was yellow.

In Situation 9, we continue our analysis of the connotative meanings of colors and explore another element previously discussed. While in an earlier situation we provided an example of how the color yellow can be used to describe someone’s personality, in this situation, we see that yellow can also be utilized to convey an individual’s physical state. Algerians often use the color *yellow* to emphasize the deplorable conditions, where “a yellow person” refers to someone pale, tired, and sick.

**10.** / *feft ki rjaš sfar ki saksito šla drahmi* /

His face became all yellow when I asked him about my money.

Continuing with the notion of color and physical appearance, we should note that Situation 10 is almost similar to Situation 2 discussed above. In this context, a person’s reaction to an embarrassing question was seen as *yellow*. The situation concerned two people; one owed money to

the other; when he was asked to return the money, he had borrowed from his friend, that particular individual felt annoyed and uncomfortable by the question directed towards him. This means that *yellow*, in this respect, acquires a negative connotation.

**11.** / *seft kamis lsfar taʃ Dortmund fhal chbab* /

Have you seen Dortmund's yellow kit, isn't it nice?

In Situation 11, the color yellow is used in its default value. It is used to describe the color of a shirt, namely that of the famous German football club Borussia Dortmund. This means that in this context, the term denotes color only.

**12.** / *ja msfar roht w xalitni nstanak* /

O you yellow boy, you went and left me waiting for you.

In Situation 12, we tackle an example of a negative connotation used in a positive context. Before we analyze the situation, it is important to talk about one form of positive impoliteness. One marker of intimacy is the high rate of impoliteness used between friends. Commonly, close/intimate friends use informal jargon (calling names) with each other. In this example, we have two friends, and one left without waiting for the other. This latter used "*yellow*" to describe his friend because he kept them waiting. Even though the term "*yellow*" has a negative connotation, we cannot confirm that it is because this is a case of intimacy.

To sum up, the data analyzed and discussed above reflect the diversity of meanings one expression can acquire in different contexts. The study focused on two variables, *red* and *yellow*. Participants commented on each situation according to their knowledge and experience because the DCT was based on real data, which means that the situations reflected daily encounters. To organize our findings in a few words, Algerians considered the red color as having a positive connotation in Situations 1, 2, and 5, whereas the yellow color was marked with a negative connotation in almost all cases (except Situation 11).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Communication is not always straightforward, and people often rely on their pragmatic competence to convey meaning in everyday life. Color terms are a prime example of this phenomenon, used in specific contexts to transmit messages. This study aimed to investigate the pragmatic use of colors in Algerian Arabic.

Our findings revealed that the use of red and yellow in Algerian Arabic varied depending on the situation. Red had both positive and negative connotations, whereas yellow had almost exclusively negative connotations, with the exception of its use as a stock color term. Further research is needed to explore the meanings of other colors and to assess the impact of culture on color denotation and possible connotations through cross-cultural studies.

### Conflict of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.



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## Appendix

### استبيان

نشكرك على موافقتك على المشاركة في هذا الاستطلاع المهم الذي يصبو الى معرفة دلالات اللونين الاحمر والاصفر أثناء استعمالهما في الكلام من قبل المتحدثين الجزائريين بالعامية. اقرا الجمل التالية ثم حاول في سطر او اثنين شرح ما فهمته

(1) الله يحمر وجهك يا ولدي

.....

.....

(2) شفت وليد كي رجع وجهه حمر بعد ما سقساوه على خطيبتها

.....

.....

(3) نجي ليك نحمرلك وجهك

.....

.....

(4) كاين عباد عينهم حمرة

.....

.....

(5) الشراي عينه حمرا

.....

.....

(6) الظالم آخرتو موتا حمرة

.....

.....

(7) هذي الضحكة الصفرة تاعك واعرة بزاف

.....

.....

(8) هذيك المصفارة هي لي هدرت فيك

.....

.....

9) اليوم شفت جارك ما وجهه كان صفر

10) شفت وجهه كي رجع صفر كي سقسيته على دراهمي!!

11) شفت القميص لصفر تاع دورتموند حال شباب

12) يا المصفار رحت و خليتي نستناك

شكرا لتعاونكم