Comments on the Origin of Basic Color Terms

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It is an interesting discovery that diverse languages classify colors in generally the same way. Berlin and Kay examined 98 languages from several families and found that although languages have different numbers of basic words for colors, the colors described by these words fall into a universal system of eleven categories[1]. Moreover, languages with fewer than eleven basic color terms obey the following rules [Berlin and Kay]:

1. All languages contain terms for white and black. (To be precise, these terms distinguish light shades and dark shades.)
2. If a language contains three terms for colors, then it contains a term for red.
3. If a language contains four terms, then it contains a term for either green or yellow, but not both.
4. If a languages contains five terms, then it contains terms for both green and yellow.
5. If a language contains six terms, then it contains a term for blue.
6. If a language contains seven terms, then it contains a term for brown.
7. If a language contains eight terms or more, then it contains a term for purple, pink, orange, grey, or some combination.

The obvious question is: why do languages follow these rules? My hypothesis is that cultures find it necessary to develop words for colors in order to do their washing. That is, ‘‘language follows laundry.’’ This is a bold claim, but the evidence is compelling: the rules of laundry directly account for the rules of

[1] The eleven basic colors are black, white, gray, red, pink, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and brown. Colors such as taupe and puce don’t count, as they are recognized only by fashion consultants.

color terms.

A typical detergent box [Tide] states that colors must be separated for laundry. This is elaborated by Gottesman, who gives a basic rule of laundry: ‘‘Always separate darks and lights.’’ An obvious conclusion is that in order to wash clothing, a culture must first have words to distinguish darks and lights. This is in perfect agreement with color rule #1.

The second rule for laundry separation is ‘‘Never wash reds with anything even remotely white’’ [Gottesman]. According to my hypothesis, cultures must next develop a word to describe ‘‘red’’. This is in agreement with rule #2.

For more advanced laundry, bright colors, such as green and yellow, should be washed separately. This corresponds to rules #3 and #4.

Next, cultures will discover that washing blue jeans separately is beneficial, resulting in rule #5. Finally, the remaining colors will be named, resulting in rules #6 and #7.

Although I consider the merits of my hypothesis to be obvious, additional research can be done to confirm it. An examination of primitive dyes may reveal why greens and yellows are separated. Anthropological studies may prove the match between a culture’s words for colors and its washing habits.

I expect languages to continue to evolve as laundry practices change. For instance, in the future we may have color categories to distinguish bleachable and unbleachable colors (e.g. ‘‘colorfastblue’’ and ‘‘fadingblue’’).

References

Berlin, Brent, and Paul Kay. 1969. *Basic Color Terms.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gottesman, Greg. 1991. ‘‘Laundry and Ironing’’ in *College Survival.* New York: Prentice Hall.

Tide detergent (box). 1991. Cincinnati: Procter and Gamble.