

THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF COLOUR AND CULTURE IN TIV CONTEXTS: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The intersectionality of colour and Tiv culture in Tiv contexts: A semiotic Analysis is important because language and culture are interwoven. The existing literature on colour terms seen and reviewed by the researchers does not show the link between colour terms and Tiv culture. The objectives of the study are as follows: to identify the colour terms in the Tiv language and to examine the link between colour terms and Tiv culture. The researcher collected data for the study by holding unstructured oral interviews with twenty native speakers of Tiv from Makurdi and Gboko Local Government Areas of Benue State due to the fact that colour terms are the same among the Tiv people irrespective of their local government of origin. The collected data were presented and analysed based on the objectives of the study. The study adopted an eclectic approach by using the Theory of Basic Colour Terms which was propounded by Berlin and Kay (1969) and Linguistic Relativity Theory which was propounded by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956). The study discovered the following colour terms in Tiv: *ii* 'black', *kwèr* 'blue', *shōrshōr/kyōn-kyōn* 'green', *agbédáàng* 'yellow', *púpúúr* 'white', *nyàn bōōng* 'red', *nyàn dindèè* 'maroon' *nduran* 'brown' and *dimììn* 'dark'. The study established that, the colour terms in Tiv are signified by the Tiv people based on the worldview of the people, therefore the naming and interpretation of colour terms in Tiv is an aspect of the Tiv culture. The study contributed to the body of formal linguistic analysis on ethno-semantics by demonstrating that colour terms just as it is with languages of advanced societies, colour terms and Tiv culture are linked.

Key words: Language, colour terms, Tiv culture, world-view, Intersectionality

Introduction

Language which has been the medium of communication among human beings has relationship with other disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography, psychology, sociology among others. Hence linguistic scholars examine the concept of language in relation to the above disciplines. The study of language is not only concerned with the structure but also considers aspects of social contexts in relation to language (Halliday, 2003). Besides, the study of any language cannot be done without taking into consideration the culture of such a community or people who speak the language because every culture is associated with respective lexicons (Jourdan & Tuite, 2006).

The issue of colour terms analysis is an important area of discussion in the field of linguistics as it plays a great role in the life of modern human beings especially in respect of communication between people of familiar ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Basically, colour terms behave quite differently across languages similar to how our psychological interpretation varies in response to reflected visible light and nature.

According to Crystal (2008), ethno-semantics studies the way meaning is structured in different cultural settings (that is, in relation to the expression of kinship, colour, or the discourse structure of speech events) and the principles governing culturally conditioned semantic variation. Owing to the aforementioned situation, the analysis and identification of the ways colour terms vary from language to language is complex and complicated when ethno-semantic factors are widely taken into consideration.

Shara and Zhanar (2013) opine that comparative analysis identifying ways of colour naming in language is one of the traditional linguistic themes for investigation. They further assert that the language and culture of a given people cannot be considered to be same as others such that there is no ethnographic and semantic similarity between any two languages. To buttress the above view, Agbedo (2015) asserts

that every language assigns meanings to the signifiers in a unique way whether words are considered from a syntagmatic or paradigmatic perspective.

Because our world is adorned with colours, language and culture still filter and screen reality and determine how items and organisms around us are perceived. According to Wardhaugh (2006), communities that show little technological development employ fewest colour terms as against those that are technologically more developed and have all the eleven colours. He further stated that societies in the intermediate stage have only three intermediate colour terms; red, black and white. Since the Tiv speakers could easily translate English colours such as black, white and red into Tiv, but they cannot do the same to other colours such as sky blue, pink, deep green and so on, the Tiv language could be classified among the intermediate stage languages. Geertz (1973) submits that culture is a pattern of doing things handed over from one generation to another among a people hence the naming of symbols or, better still, colours has been part of the Tiv culture, and the Tiv people have colour terms which they use to talk about different colours in different situations, and the colours represent different situations among the Tiv people.

The name Tiv refers to a people, their ancestral father and the language of the Tiv people and the people whose native language is Tiv. Udu (2009) submits that *Tiv* is a splinter group of the Bantu, and *Tiv* belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, which is further classified as the Benue-Congo language. He further asserted that the Tiv people are native to some local government areas across Benue, Cross-River, Nasarawa and Taraba States. Yina (2011) stated that Tiv is a minority ethnic group that occupies part of the rolling Savannah region, popularly known as the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

The existing literature on colour terms seen from the four reviewed papers by the researchers does not show the intersectionality of colour and Tiv culture. Hence, this study was designed to examine the link between colour terms and Tiv culture. The objectives of the study are as follows: to identify the colour terms in the Tiv language and to examine the link between colour terms and Tiv culture.

Review of related literature

Òkéwándé (2017) conducted research on the topic ‘A Semiotic Investigation of Philosophical Relations between Ifá and Ayò Ọlópón among the Yorùbá People of Nigeria’. This study investigated the relationship between Ifá and Ayò Ọlópón objects and symbols with reference to Yorùbá culture. According to the findings of the study, Ifá was the foundation on which the culture of the Yorùbá people was consolidated. Ayò Ọlópón had been established as having philosophical links with Ifá. The findings showed that, Ayò Ọlópón’s value was beyond recreation or relaxation as it manifested the Yorùbá philosophy, especially regarding moral code. The findings further indicate that, different Yoruba symbols, objects and artifacts are associated with different philosophies connected with their beliefs and ways of life. The previous study focused on the Yoruba symbols and culture whereas the present study focuses on the link between colour terms and Tiv culture.

Ogunkunle (2013) conducted research on the theme ‘Semiotic reading of the symbols of Yoruba traditional marriage’. This paper investigated the semiotic reading of the items used in Yoruba traditional marriage, and sought to unravel the meaning of the elements of culture in traditional marriage ceremonies in Yoruba and the meaning of the signs (objects) used. The research findings show that, language has been justified as social semiotics and communication system for interpreting signs. These signs cannot be separated from culture, but are culture-bound in interpretation. This is reflected in the analysis of the signs used in Yoruba traditional marriage ceremony. This study also showed that verbal and non-verbal languages have metafunctions. This study, therefore, portrays that anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something - referring to or standing for something other than itself. The previous study focused on the reading of the symbols of Yoruba traditional marriage while this study focused on the link between colour terms and Tiv culture.

Ibrahim (2014) conducted a study on the topic: ‘Expanding the domains of English influence: The issue of colour naming in some indigenous Nigerian languages’. The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of English on speakers of some indigenous Nigerian languages, with an emphasis on Hausa, in

relation to the other languages' colour terms. This study adopted the *Sociolinguistic Theory of Language Contact*. The study found that some English colour terms have been loaned into these languages. The commonly loaned colour terms are *blue*, and to a lesser extent *yellow*, *gold* and *silver*. The loaned terms have some of their phonemes that were adapted to phonemic patterns of the indigenous languages. The most common phonemic adaptation that features in the languages are the split consonant feature. Examples of phoneme adaptations of English colour terms in some Nigerian languages include, *ibulu* for blue in Igala, *bulu* in Hausa and *ehbulu* in Esan, while yellow is *yalo* in Hausa. The findings of the study also demonstrates that code-switching to English when the need for a colour word arises in casual speech. Besides, colour terms in indigenous Nigerian languages vary, and their frequency of use is on the decrease. The previous study investigated the impact of English on speakers of some indigenous Nigerian languages in relation to other languages' colour terms while the present study examines the link between colour terms and Tiv culture.

Gbaden (1994) conducted out a study on the topic 'A critical survey of Tiv design motifs' and discovered nine colours associated with these motifs. The findings of the study show that the colours on the Tiv design motifs serve as the signifiers and the signified, therefore the colours communicate some messages among the Tiv people. The previous study focused on identifying the various colours on Tiv motifs and their significances while this present study examines the intersectionality of colour and culture in Tiv contexts.

Methodology

The researchers collected data for the study by holding unstructured oral interviews with native speakers of Tiv from Makurdi and Gboko Local Government Areas of Benue State due to the fact that colour terms are the same among the Tiv people irrespective of their local government of origin. The researchers conducted interviews with 20 native speakers of Tiv from the select local government areas on colour terms in Tiv. The collected data were presented and analysed based on the objectives of the study. This study adopted an eclectic approach by using the Theory of Basic Colour Terms which was propounded by Berlin and Kay (1969) and Linguistic Relativity Theory which was propounded by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956). Theory of Basic Colour Terms centres on the notion of basic colour terms (BCT). The basic colour term is a colour word that is applicable to a wide class of objects, is mono-lexemic and is reliably used by most native speakers. The theory of BCT also holds that the languages of modern industrial societies have thousands of colours, but only a slender stock of basic colour terms. On the other hand, Linguistic Relativity Theory stresses the primacy of culture and language in human cognition and non-linguistic behaviour. The theory views language as semantically arbitrary relative to every other language. There different languages categories the colour continuum in different ways, and a particular colour term in one language may not represent the same colour domain as its equivalent in another language.

Analysis

1. *Nyìàn* 'Red'



The above colour as identified by the interviewees is called *nyìàn* 'red' in the Tiv, and its origin of the colour is traced to blood. The colour term corresponds to the description by Gbaden (1994) who calls the above colour *nyìàn* 'red'. The colour is seen among the Tiv people as an indicator of danger and blood over the years, and this philosophy has been passed down from one generation to another. The handing down of the colour terms and the philosophy associated with them show that colours have intersectionality with Tiv culture and so recognised in the Tiv language. The existing relationship between *nyìàn* 'red' and Tiv culture shows that every Tiv man has the philosophy that 'red' is associated with danger. The Tiv culture puts in the minds of the Tiv people that the colour 'red' is danger and blood sacrifices; therefore, the Tiv people do not celebrate the colour. The colour *nyìàn* 'red' signifies danger and blood sacrifices among the Tiv people because the people view anything red as danger and blood, and the situation corresponds with traffic lights regulation on highways where once the traffic

reads red, moving vehicles on the signalling wing are expected to stop because there is danger ahead. The situation also corresponds with the pattern of dressing the altar in the Catholic Church and the dress code of the Catholic priests who wear red chasubles when celebrating Mass to mark the remembrances of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the Martyrs of the Church. The handing down of the danger poses by *nyìàn* 'red' from generation to generation in Tiv shows that colours are part of Tiv culture, and the situation supports the position of Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) on the primacy of culture and language for human cognition and non-linguistic behaviour. The colour terms in Tiv are incorporated into the philosophy of the Tiv people since the naming and interpretation of the colours is determined by how the people view and interpret societal happenings around them. The intersectionality between Tiv culture and colour terms can be compared to the submission by Òkèwándé (2017) that, different Yoruba symbols, objects and artifacts are associated with different philosophies connected with the Yoruba people's beliefs and ways of life.

2. *íí* 'black'



Field work, 2023.

The above colour is identified by interviewees as *íí* 'black' in the Tiv language and its origin is traced to charcoal and soot. The colour term corresponds with the description by Gbaden (1994) who called the above colour *íí* 'black'. The notion that 'black' signifies evil, richness of soil, death, personality among the Tiv people has been handed down from generation to generation among the Tiv people. Hence, it is within the philosophy of the Tiv people both old and young that black is associated with evil and death. Therefore, the people traditionally put on black clothes to show that they are mourning their loved ones, particularly at funerals and burials. However, the advent of Christianity has affected the worldview of the Tiv people about death since the Tiv put on white clothes in recent times to mourn their loved ones. Kay (2001) views the above colour symbol and names it as black, however, it is worth noting that the symbol has been described differently by the Tiv people as *íí* 'black'. Hence the nomenclature of the above colour symbol buttresses Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) notion that different languages categories the colour continuum in a different way and a certain colour term in one language need not signify the same colour domain as its equivalent in another language. The Tiv colour term *íí* 'black' is a sign of sorrow; therefore, the interpretation of the colour term corroborates Ogunkunle (2013) claim that anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something - referring to or standing for something other than itself.

3. *kwèr* 'blue'



Field work, 2023.

The above colour is identified and called *kwèr* 'blue' in the Tiv language by the interviewees. The Tiv culture considers the above colour as a sign of celestial affiliation and love, so the notion is handed down to children by their parents since the intersectionality between Tiv culture and colours has come to stay. Owing to the way of life of the Tiv people, no Tiv man can adopt the *kwèr* 'blue' when mourning someone or when there is blood shedding in the land, but rather, the colour is adopted to show that there is love and celestial affiliation. The use of *kwèr* 'blue' corresponds with the submission by Gbaden (1994) who argues that *kwèr* 'blue' symbolises celestial elements and forces, as well as love among the Tiv people. The existence of the colour *kwèr* 'blue' in Tiv is a result of borrowing since English colour terms have found their way into the Tiv language because the Tiv people have embraced civilisation and technology which have great impact on them. Hence, the study agrees with the assertion by Ibrahim (2014) that some English colour terms have been loaned into some indigenous Nigerian languages, and the loaned terms have some of their phonemes adapted to follow the phonemic patterns of the indigenous languages. However, in Tiv, *kwèr* 'blue' is the colour term for blue, so the researchers discovered that the conception of the colour term *kwèr* 'blue' is loaned into Tiv but not the graphological

and phonological representation of the colour term. The position of Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) that culture determines language is buttressed through the naming and conceptualisation of the colour term *kwèr* ‘blue’ in Tiv.

4. *Nyàn dindèè* ‘maroon’



The above colour called *Nyàn dindèè* ‘maroon’ by the interviewees in Tiv language and is a subcategory of the colour term *nyàn* ‘red’. The Tiv culture is shaped by its constant interaction with other cultures, especially the Western culture which has its way into African culture through formal education. The Tiv culture recognises certain colours as the Tiv people begin to experience these colours in their daily interactions with people of other cultures. Hence, the need to name such colours in Tiv becomes necessary, and people have certain perceptions about the colours. *The nyàn dindèè* ‘maroon’ stands as a symbol of love and joy in Tiv, thereby corresponding with the submission by Gbaden (1994) that *nyàn dindèè* symbolises *dooshima* ‘love’ and *iember* ‘joy’. The role of the *nyàn dindèè* ‘maroon’ in representing love among the Tiv people is similar to the festival of lovers’ day which is called Valentine’s Day – a day on which people wear red clothes to symbolise love. The colour *nyàn dindèè* ‘maroon’ has been part of the worldview of the Tiv people since people view different shades of red; that is *nyàn dindèè* ‘maroon’ and *nyàn bōōng* ‘Red’. Owing to the similarity that *nyàn dindèè* ‘maroon’ has with *nyàn bōōng* ‘Red’, the researchers would say that *nyàn dindèè* ‘maroon’ is a subcategory of the colour term ‘red’. The white people call the above colour symbol ‘maroon’ whereas the Tiv people call the same symbol *nyàn dindèè* which portrays differences in the worldview and language of the aforementioned ethnic groups. The varying worldviews bring about different names for the colours in English and Tiv; therefore, the, situation proves the claim by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) that the interaction between culture and language influences the way people recognise, understand and describe concepts in society.

5. *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn* ‘green’



Field work, 2023.

The above colour is called *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn* ‘green’ in the Tiv language and its origin is traced to vegetation and grasses. The colour *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn* ‘green’ is regarded in Tiv culture as a sign of growth, progress, reconciliation, surrender and peace. The description of the above colour as *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn* ‘green’ corresponds to with the description by Gbaden (1994) who calls the colour *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn* ‘green’. The notion that *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn* ‘green’ symbolises growth of animals, humans and plants and also mental capabilities among the Tiv people has been passed down from generation to generation and it is an integral part of the Tiv culture. In times of communal crises, the people involved in the crises, presents ‘Ayande’ fresh leaves to their opponents to show that they have surrendered to the fight, and are willing to embrace peace. The opponents by see the move for reconciliation and peace, and then sheath their swords and embrace peace. It is important to note that the symbol which the Tiv people call *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn*, the English people call it ‘green’ based on the varying worldviews and languages of the two ethnic groups. Owing to the relationship between culture and language, the researchers would say that the varying worldviews influence the description of the above colour symbol in Tiv just like English; therefore, the, situation proves the claim by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) that the interaction between culture and language influences the way people recognise, understand and describe concepts in society.

6. *Agbédááng* ‘yellow’



Field work, 2023.

During interaction with the interviewees the above colour was identified and called *agbédáàng* ‘yellow’ in the Tiv language and its origin is traced to some fashionable beads worn around the waist by Tiv women some time ago. The colour term corresponds to the description by Gbaden (1994) who calls the above colour *agbédàáng* ‘yellow’. Wearing of beads by women has been part of Tiv culture and particularly in the past Tiv women used to wear yellow beads so when the Tiv experienced the English colour, they called it *agbédàáng* ‘yellow’ due to the resemblance between the colour symbol and the waist beads colour. The colour *agbédàáng* ‘yellow’ symbolises friendliness in Tiv culture, and the symbolism associated with the colour is handed down from one generation to another among the Tiv people. The Tiv women may have stopped wearing the yellow beads; however, they still wear different colours of beads, and the meaning attached to the beads still rings in the psyche of the Tiv people since it is part of the Tiv worldview. The varying worldviews bring about different names for the colour which is of the same identity in the English and Tiv, therefore the situation proves the claim by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) that the interaction between culture and language influences the way people recognise, understand and describe concepts in society. The recognition of *agbédáàng* ‘yellow’ as a colour in Tiv confirms the assertion by Kay (2001) that some languages consider black, white, red, yellow, green and blue as their basic colour terms.

7. *púpúúr* ‘white’



Field work, 2023.

The above colour is called *púpúúr* ‘white’ in Tiv, and its origin is traced to holiness. The colour term corresponds with the description by Gbaden (1994) who calls the colour *púpúúr* ‘white’. It is in the psyche of every Tiv man that *púpúúr* ‘white’ represents purity, and the mental representation of the colour is passed down by the elder ones to the younger ones, so when the Tiv people put forward a white object, they are projecting or professing holiness, innocence or purity. Since white is recognised in Tiv culture as symbol of holiness, innocence and purity, the Tiv people consciously put on white clothes on days when they are going to Church or performing a marriage ceremony. The significance of the white colour among the Tiv could be said to have been influenced by the tenets of the Tiv traditional religion and even Christianity to some extent. Then by extension, the researcher would say that white indicate happiness or the spirit of celebration among the Tiv people. The worldview of the Tiv people also recognises that holiness is signified in the white colour, so the Tiv people visualise the colour as a symbol of holiness, purity and happiness in all situations. The recognition of *púpúúr* ‘white’ as a colour in Tiv confirms the assertion by Kay (2001) that some languages considers black, white, red, yellow, green and blue as their basic colour

8. *Nduran* ‘brown’



Field work, 2023.

The above colour is called *nduran* ‘brown’ in Tiv, and the name of the colour term corresponds with the rusty appearance looks of iron or water around fadama lands. A mere mention of the colour brings a picture of the rust to the mind of the Tiv people since the colour originates from the rusty looks of

irons. Owing to the relationship between culture and language, the researchers would say that the Tiv worldview determines the naming of the above colour symbol which has some resemblance with the rusty looks of irons and water found around fadama lands. The link between the Tiv worldview and the above colour term proves the claim by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) claim that the interaction between culture and language influences the way people recognise, understand and describe concepts in society.

8. *Dìmììn* ‘dark’



Field work, 2023.

The above colour is called *Dìmììn* ‘dark’ in the Tiv, and its origin of the colour is traced to the dark clouds. The name of the colour term corresponds with the description by Gbaden (1994) who calls the colour *dìmììn* ‘dark’ in Tiv. The Tiv culture associate darkness with the colour *dìmììn* ‘dark’ symbolises ‘evil’ among the Tiv people, since darkness is considered to be an attribute of evil in society. The Tiv people believe that anything dark is associated with Satan or evil activities, therefore the colour *dìmììn* ‘dark’ in Tiv is considered to represent evil in the Tiv culture. Hence, no Tiv person sees the colour as a reflection of hope, growth, purity, celebration unlike *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn* ‘green’ and *púpúúr* ‘white’. According to Kay (2001), some languages consider black, white, red, yellow, green and blue as their basic colour terms, so the researchers would say that since *dìmììn* ‘dark’ signifies evil, the colour term is a subcategory of the basic colour term ‘black’. Owing to the relationship between culture and language, the researcher would say that the name of the above colour symbol and its signification is dependent on the Tiv culture. Hence, the link between Tiv culture and colour terms is a confirmation of the claim by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) claim that the interaction between culture and language influences the way people recognise, understand and describe concepts in society.

Conclusion

The study confirmed the existence of the following colour terms in Tiv: *ii* ‘black’, *kwèr* ‘blue’, *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn* ‘green’, *agbédaáng* ‘yellow’ and *púpúúr* ‘white’, *nyíàn* ‘red’, *nyíàn dindèè* ‘maroon’ *nduran* ‘brown’ and *dìmììn* ‘dark’. The study established that the colour terms in Tiv are signified by the Tiv people based on the worldview of the people, therefore the naming and interpretation of colour terms in Tiv are an aspect of the Tiv culture. The findings of the study show that the colour *nyíàn dindèè* ‘maroon’ symbolises *dooshima* ‘love’ and *iember* ‘joy’ while the colour *shōrshōr/kyôn-kyôn* ‘green’ symbolises growth of animal, man and plant in Tiv.

Besides, the study discovered that *nyian* ‘red’ signifies danger and blood sacrifice in Tiv culture while the black colour signifies personality, richness of soil, evil, death among the Tiv people. The study found out that the colour *kwèr* ‘blue’ represents celestial elements and forces, as well as love in the Tiv. The findings of the study show that the colour *agbédaáng* ‘yellow’ symbolises friendliness among the Tiv people; the colour *nduran* ‘brown’ symbolises rusty nature among the Tiv people and the colour *dìmììn* ‘dark’ symbolises ‘evil’ among the Tiv people. Hence, researchers would say that the nomenclature and interpretation of colour terms in Tiv is a reflection of the Tiv culture. The study contributes to the body of formal linguistic analysis on ethno-semantics by demonstrating the intersectionality of colour and Tiv culture.

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