

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE USAGE OF COLORS IN ENGLISH AND KOREAN: A COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** This research explores how English and Korean languages describe and use colors differently. By analyzing basic color words, common phrases, and cultural meanings, the study shows that while both languages recognize similar fundamental colors based on human vision, they organize and interpret these colors in distinct ways. Korean has a more elaborate system for certain color ranges, especially in the blue-green area, whereas English makes finer distinctions elsewhere. These variations mirror each culture's values and historical background. These insights matter for translators, cross-cultural communication, and understanding how language shapes thought.

**Key words:** color words, how language influences thought, meaning across cultures, Korean language, English language, fundamental color terms

### Introduction

Recognizing colors is a basic human ability, but different languages describe colors in their own ways. Since Berlin and Kay's groundbreaking research in 1969, linguists have debated how color perception relates to the words we use. Although humans everywhere see colors similarly due to our biology, languages divide up the color spectrum differently and attach various cultural meanings to different shades.

English and Korean come from completely different language families and organize colors distinctly. English, rooted in Germanic languages with strong Latin influences, has eleven fundamental color words by Berlin and Kay's standards. Korean, which stands alone linguistically, arranges color terms differently, with added complexity in specific color ranges and cultural meanings that don't match English patterns.

This research systematically compares how these two languages handle colors across three main areas: basic color vocabulary, figurative expressions and idioms, and cultural symbolism. Learning about these similarities and differences helps us understand cognitive linguistics, cultural anthropology, and improves translation and cross-cultural dialogue.

### Methods

The study used multiple methods, including linguistic examination, analysis of large text collections, and reviewing existing literature. Initially, researchers identified basic color words in both languages using Berlin and Kay's criteria: simple word structure, common usage, and psychological importance. Next, they gathered idioms and figurative color expressions from dictionaries, idiom collections, and text databases like the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the Sejong Korean Corpus.

The research examined three aspects: vocabulary structure (quantity and arrangement of basic color words), meaning boundaries (how each language splits the color spectrum), and practical usage (idioms and cultural meanings). Researchers analyzed color terms for their scope of reference, compound word formation, and figurative meanings. Cultural symbolism was studied through traditional writings, proverbs, and modern language patterns. The comparison highlighted where the languages align and differ, paying special attention to systematic variations that reveal cultural or perceptual differences rather than random language quirks.

## Results

English has eleven fundamental color words: white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and gray. Korean's core color vocabulary differs somewhat, with the most essential terms being 하얗다 (hayata, white), 까맣다 (kkamata, black), 빨갳다 (ppalgata, red), 파랳다 (parata, blue), and 노랳다 (norata, yellow). Interestingly, Korean traditionally didn't separate blue and green into distinct basic categories—푸르다 (pureuda) historically covered both, although modern Korean now uses 초록 (chorok) for green and 파랑 (parang) for blue.

A major difference appears in the blue-green zone. English clearly separates blue from green, but Korean's traditional term 푸르다 (pureuda) covers both areas, with its exact meaning depending on context. This word can equally describe the sky, sea, and green plants. While modern Korean has adopted more specific words, the broader category remains common in many phrases.

English makes clearer distinctions among warm colors, with separate basic words for orange, pink, and purple, while Korean often combines words or uses borrowed terms for these categories. Conversely, Korean has more vocabulary for certain shades, particularly in the white-light range, with multiple words distinguishing subtle differences in brightness and clarity. Both languages use color words metaphorically, though with different focuses. English uses "green" for inexperience ("green with envy," "greenhorn") and environmental awareness. Korean uses 파랳다 (parata, blue) in phrases like "파랳게 젊다" (parage jeomda, "bluely young") to express extreme youth or energy.

Red has positive meanings in Korean culture (celebrations, luck), contrasting with English's mixed meanings (danger, passion, financial loss). White represents purity in both cultures but additionally connects with death and mourning in Korean tradition. Black suggests sophistication and formality in English while carrying more consistently negative meanings in traditional Korean, though modern usage is changing. Emotional connections to colors show both parallels and contrasts. Both languages link blue with sadness ("feeling blue" in English, though less directly in Korean), but yellow differs—suggesting cowardice in English versus a more neutral or positive meaning in Korean.

## Discussion

The results show both universal and culture-specific color patterns. The commonalities—especially the universal presence of words for white, black, red, yellow, and blue/green—confirm Berlin and Kay's theory about universal patterns in how color vocabulary develops. That both languages emphasize these categories points to shared perceptual and cognitive foundations.

Yet the differences are equally revealing. Korean's blue-green spectrum reflects a different mental organization of this color area, potentially shaped by environmental conditions and cultural priorities. Each language's elaborate vocabulary for certain color ranges reflects cultural importance—English speakers' distinction of orange as fundamental might connect to agricultural heritage, while Korean's detailed white vocabulary reflects cultural values surrounding purity and clarity. The different cultural associations show how languages expand basic perceptual categories into cultural realms. These expansions aren't random but reflect unique historical experiences, religious influences, and social customs within each language community.

## Conclusion

This comparison shows that English and Korean share basic similarities in color categorization while displaying meaningful differences in how they divide meanings, develop vocabulary, and attach cultural associations. These differences matter practically for translation, where exact equivalents often don't exist, and theoretically for understanding connections between language, perception, and culture.

Future studies should use experimental approaches to test whether these language differences correspond to perceptual or cognitive differences among speakers. Furthermore, examining color terminology in additional languages would provide broader context for understanding the patterns found here. As worldwide communication expands, understanding these cross-language variations becomes increasingly vital for effective intercultural interaction.

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