Adjectives 'Black'/'Черный', 'Red'/'Красный' and 'White'/'Белый' in English and Russian

1. Introduction

In this project I examine translations of the terms 'black', 'red' and 'white' from English into Russian, and of the terms 'черный', 'красный' and 'белый' in the opposite direction. I chose these terms not for linguistic reasons, but because I thought it would be interesting to study the associations people from two different cultures make with them. Though this essay focuses on translation, it may, in passing, highlight some of these. The work done could serve as a basis for a similar exploration of other colours.

In choosing the colours for this survey, I took as a starting point the hypothesis outlined in Berlin and Kay's seminal, if later criticised, *Basic Color Terms*, namely that:

1. All languages contain terms for white and black.
2. If a language contains three terms, then it contains a term for red.[1]

According to Berlin and Kay, these three colours are the most widely distinguished across languages and cultures. Therefore, an investigation of the use of colour terms in English and Russian is justified in starting with them. In addition, all feature in metaphorical collocates in both languages that are a stimulating topic of research.

This set of words differs from some of those chosen by my colleagues on this course for their projects in that confusion between them is unlikely, at least when they are being used to describe the actual colour of something. In other words, if the colour of an object falls within the spectral range covered by one of them (e.g. black), that object is extremely unlikely to be described as either of the others (e.g. red or white). Since the spectral ranges covered by the English terms are more or less identical with those covered by their Russian equivalents, one is unlikely to select, say, 'белый' or 'красный' to translate 'black' when the actual colour of something is being described. Any differences here are far more likely to involve other colours.

1.1.   The working method

When seeking concordance lines I set the number of results to be shown to 300, the most my computer could copy without crashing, since I wanted to use it to work with them rather than print them all out. Copied into MS Word, they came out as a table with separate columns for the text preceding the colour word, the colour word itself, and the text following it. Having fitted

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[1] Berlin and Kay (1969), p. 2.

them to the page (by choosing 'landscape' from the page orientation options and the smallest font possible), I classified them. I colour-coded them according to their referents (using the fill option from the Tables and Borders menu), assigning each colour a number, for which I created a new column on the left of the table. This made the tables a) easier to sort, and b) much easier on the eye. It also facilitated double-checking of the categorisation, it being obvious when colour and number did not match (I assumed I was not going to get both the colour and number of the concordance line wrong too often). Later, when necessary, I made modifications.

This method, following the practice of dictionary making (Sinclair, 1991), certainly has its advantages, though perhaps it might be more useful in another project. For this exercise it might have been easier to scan the concordance lines and pick out new collocation categories whenever they came up, rather than trying to classify every line, particularly since, as I explain below, I decided early on not to include every collocate in the XML dictionary I was to produce. The next step would be to search the Leeds corpus set again for examples of each 'colour word + referent' collocation. In fact, I resorted to this anyway whenever the concordance lines in my tables were inappropriate for inclusion in a dictionary.

1.2. The XML dictionary

One of our tasks was to create a bilingual XML dictionary with entries for each of our terms. I used the UniRed XML editor programme, downloadable from http://prdownloads.sourceforge.net/unired/ur204.exe?download, for this, and consulted the Text Encoding Initiative guidelines at http://www.tei-c.org/P4X/. I also found David Seaman's quick list of TEI tags at http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/tei/teiquic.html very useful. I used the validation service available at http://www.stg.brown.edu/service/xmlvalid/ to validate the documents and confirmed their validity by opening them with Windows Explorer. Although each of the words in this study can have dozens of collocates, for practical reasons I restricted the number cover in the dictionary to ten each. I also restricted the survey to the adjectival senses of the words, even though they can all function as nouns.

2. The results

As expected, there proved to be little or no diversity between the languages when a colour was being described directly. Little requires to be said about this.

Much more challenging than investigating 'literal' uses of these colour words (as far as something can be 'literally' red, for example), was investigating 'non-literal' uses of them. There are at least two broad categories of such uses. The first covers what may be termed 'pseudo-literal

colour descriptions'. Here, although appearing to do so, the word does not convey the actual colour of an object. An example is the use of the word 'red' in describing the colour of someone's hair in the English corpus, as in: 'a young woman with red hair' [BNC]. 'Red' hair is usually not really red at all, so perhaps it is not surprising that 'красный' is not the adjective used to describe it in Russian, which is 'рыжий', as in 'певица Анастасия с ярко-рыжими волосами' [*Izvestia*] ('the singer Anastasia with bright red hair'). Similarly, it could be argued that the use of 'красный' in the phrase 'красное дерево' ('mahogany'), as in 'Корабль был потрясающий, все каюты были красного дерева' [*Izvestia*] ('The boat was fabulous; all the cabins were mahogany'), is not strictly accurate.

The sphere of food and drink provides several examples of this, such as 'white wine', which is not white at all but is described as being so in both English (as in 'Jay stuck to white wine and soda' [BNC]) and Russian (as in 'очень легкое белое вино из винограда Верначчиа' [*Izvestia*] ('a very light white wine made from the Vernaccia grape')). This area, incidentally, threw up another issue: that of the default 'colour' of something – the 'colour' one would expect something to be were no colour word used to describe it. For instance, if we want to convey the fact that a cup of tea is 'black' (i.e., contains no milk) in a British context, we usually have to say so specifically, since British tea usually contains milk. Russian tea, conversely, is normally 'black', and so if we want to convey the fact that a cup (or, often, in the Russian context, glass) of tea contains milk, we again usually have to say so specifically. This is a general problem in translation that does not just concern colours.

Overall, there was considerable agreement between the languages with regard to 'pseudo-literal colour descriptions', at least where our three colours were concerned.

There was also much agreement between the languages with regard to 'idiomatic and metaphorical descriptions', though it was not always easy to tell if a Russian phrase was 'genuinely Russian' or merely a calque from (presumably) English. What does seem clear is the tendency of both languages to use the term 'black'/'черный' in negative contexts. In English we find:

  (1) *'the Opposition denounced the move as being a "black day for Victoria"' [Reuters];*
  (2) *'Talabani should have realised the "black fate" awaiting him' [Reuters];*
  (3) *'a black list of firms suspected of sales tax evasions' [Reuters];*
  (4) *'5 CD plants were estimated to supply about one in eight of all illegal copies on the world CD black market' [Reuters];* and
  (5) *'Dinnertime was a very gloomy affair. Alan was in a black mood' [BNC].*
Similarly, Russian concordance lines include:

(6) *'Потом был финальный матч, проигрыш которого почти всецело объясняли черным днем Роналдо' [Izvestia]* ('Then came the final, the defeat in which was put down almost exclusively to a black day for Ronaldo');

(7) *'Мы никогда не работали на черном рынке, –подчеркнул Богуш– И никогда не скрывали суммы контрактов и трансферов наших футболистов' [Izvestia]* ('"We have never operated on the black market," stressed Bogush. "And we've never concealed the sums involved in the contracts and transfers of our footballers"'); and

(8) *'В составленном им "черном списке" выпускающих пиратскую продукцию предприятий они занимали видное место' [Izvestia]* ('They occupied a prominent position in the blacklist compiled by him of enterprises producing pirate goods').

In this area Russian seems to permit a wider range of collocates with both 'черный' and 'белый' than English does with 'black' and 'white', employing the former in several cases where English would more likely use something like 'shady', 'underhand' or 'crooked', and the latter in several cases where English would more likely use something like 'above-board' or 'legal'. As Mikhail Khazin explains[2], *'"Белый" бизнес –это легальный бизнес, осуществляемый легальными методами. "Серый" –это легальный бизнес, осуществляемый нелегальными методами, то есть без уплаты налогов. "Черный" бизнес –это нелегальный бизнес – преступный: наркотики, проституция и т.д.'* ('"White" business is legal business conducted by legal methods. "Grey" is legal business conducted by illegal methods. "Black" business is illegal, criminal business –drugs, prostitution, and so on'.) For example, the concordance lines in the Russian corpora include:

(9) *'работник получает "черную" зарплату, в конверте'* [Izvestia] ('the worker receives "underhand" pay, in an envelope')

The '"черную" зарплату' here, which is not subject to taxation, contrasts with the '"белая" зарплата' in

(10) *'специалисты с большей охотой идут в банки, где уровень зарплат ниже, чем в среднем по рынку, но где практикуется так называемая "белая" зарплата, а также различные социальные гарантии'* [Izvestia] ('specialists are more willing to go to banks where wages are lower than the market average but paid in an "above-board" manner, and where there are also various social safety nets'),

There does not seem to be such a definite link between 'white' and goodness in English. The only explicit example of such a connexion in the concordance lines that came up when I searched the English corpus was the phrase 'white knight', as in:

(11) *'A white knight is unlikely to save Clyde Petroleum'* [Reuters].

The topic of colour words and 'race' merits closer inspection. Whereas in English one can describe people as 'black' (e.g. 'the exciting nature of work being produced by black artists in the U.K.' [BNC]) or 'white' (e.g. 'reconciliation between indigenous and white Australians'

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[2] http://www.smb-support.org/bp/arhiv/4/an.htm Consulted at 14:07 on 16/12/03.

[Reuters]), one would be less likely to describe them as 'черный' or 'белый' in Russian, though one can do so., as demonstrated in

(12) *в составе сборной нет ни одного черного игрока* [Izvestia] ('the team contains not one black player')

(13) *конфискация у белых фермеров принадлежащих им земель* [Izvestia] ('The confiscation of land belonging to white farmers')

Alternative Russian adjectives applicable here in the former context include 'чернокожий' (literally 'black-skinned), as in 'она стала первой чернокожей актрисой, получившей премию в этой номинации' [*Izvestia*] ('she became the first black actress to receive an award in this category') and 'темнокожий' (literally 'dark-skinned'), as in 'темнокожая теннисистка Серена Уильямс' [*Izvestia*] ('the black women's tennis player Serena Williams'. More frequent than either of these adjectives in the corpus, however, is the noun 'негр' ('negro'). Whereas the English word 'nigger' has extremely negative connotations

(14) *It was very disturbing to hear of patients being referred to as "nigger".*[BNC]

this seems not to be true of the Russian word 'негр'[3], e.g.

(15) *Ведется же сегодня в русском языке борьба со словом "жид", а в английском –со словом "негр"'* [Izvestia] ('Today there is a battle going on in the Russian language with the word 'zhid' ['yid'], and in English with the word 'nigger')

As for 'white' in this context in Russian, 'белокожий' (literally 'white-skinned') appears in

(16) *'Здесь уместна старая шутка о том, что хуже всего в США живется белокожему мужчине'* [Izvestia] ('Here the old joke about how the white man has it worse than anyone else in the USA is appropriate')

but the total number of concordance lines for it was 6, as opposed to 145 for 'чернокожий'. This could, of course, simply reflect the fact that in a Russian context 'white' is the 'default' colour of a human being. 'Светлокожий' ('light-skinned'), like 'темнокожий', is a relative term, as demonstrated in

(17) *'Строятся вполне серьезные теории, что темнокожие афроамериканцы самой природой созданы для спринта и прыжков в длину, темнокожие африканцы –для бега на длинные и сверхдлинные дистанции темнокожие, а светлокожие жители Магриба –для средних дистанций'* [Izvestia] 'Fully serious theories have been developed claiming that nature itself has built dark-skinned Afro-Americans for sprinting and the long jump, dark-skinned Africans for long and very long distances, and the light-skinned inhabitants of the Maghreb for middle distances').

However, it too is much less frequent than its 'black' counterpart, occurring in just 3 concordance lines to the latter's 88.

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[3] It would be interesting to ask black Russians about this.

Like the English 'black' and 'white', both 'черный' and 'белый' can function as nouns in this context. Examples of such use are

(18) *'public school integration of blacks and whites'* [Reuters]
(19) *Кстати, ведь есть случаи, когда расистами являются не игроки, а сами крикетные организации и страдают не черные, а белые'* [Izvestia] ('Indeed, there are case where it is not the players who are racist but the actual cricketing organization, and it is not blacks who suffer, but whites').

Furthermore, the epithet can be transferred in English, so that we have phrases such as 'a black church', as in 'President Bill Clinton worshipped at a black church on Sunday' [Reuters]. This, of course, does not mean the church is literally black, but that it is frequented by black people. One would not usually refer to a 'черная церковь' in such circumstances in Russian.

Several phrases involving 'red'/'красный' are connected with qualitative extremes. Thus, in English we have:

(20) *The centre ... says the political situation in Kenya is "red hot"...'* [Reuters],

where the phrase 'red hot' is used in a figurative sense. 'Красный' used to mean 'beautiful' in Russian, so that 'Красная площадь' should properly be translated into English as 'Beautiful Square', rather than 'Red Square'.[4] This meaning survives, if obliquely, in the phrase 'красное словцо', as in

(21) *'То, что происходит сейчас на российско-финской границе, можно для красного словца назвать "транспортной войной", можно –просто "напряженным положением."'* [Izvestia] 'What is happening now on the Russo-Finnish border may for effect be called a "transport war", or else simply a "strained situation".'

It would be interesting to investigate how much use of the word 'красный' in Russian has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, since the adjective is so closely associated with the Communist Party that ruled it. One would imagine that at the very least its frequency in publications such as newspapers would have dropped considerably. Unfortunately, so far as I am aware, no searchable corpus of Communist-era texts of this nature is available on the web.

3. Comments and Conclusions

This course clearly offers much scope for research; I realise I have but scratched the surface of what has proved to be a fascinating topic. Corpora such as the ones consulted in this study clearly valuable of evidence of how language is used (though the Russian corpus could do with being larger, since many of the collocates in it appear in a small number of examples, with the result that it is difficult to draw conclusions about them). However, though they are highly useful in helping one ascertain for whether or not these colour terms are used in Russian in the same

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[4] See the entry for 'красный' at http://plisco.ru/notes/linguas/moved.html (consulted at 21:20 on 16/12/03).

situations in which they are used in English (and vice versa), they are not so useful in providing alternatives if they are not. For example, it is not easy to work out a translation for the above-mentioned phrase 'black church' using them.

In general, there seems to be a high degree of correspondence between English and Russian uses of these colour words, particularly in the cases of 'black'/'черный' and 'white'/'белый'. It would be interesting to see if there was a similar correspondence with regard to the use of other colour words.

4. References

Berlin, Brent, and Paul Kay (1969) *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

Sinclair, John *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. 1991.

Word count: 2726