Lacandon Colour Terms

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Introduction

This paper considers colour terms in Lacandon, a Yucatec language spoken in the eastern state of Chiapas, Mexico. I will show how it uses morphological processes similar to those found in the other Mayan languages to extend its distinctive set of basic colour terms: black, white, red, yellow, and blue/green. Basic colour terms are lexemes that cannot be analysed into smaller morphemes, do not have compositional meanings, are psychologically salient, and are applicable to a wide range of objects (Berlin and Kay 1969). These terms are often discovered using the stimuli provided by Munsell colour chips. The Munsell framework limits the number and range of sensory attributes to only three dimensions of contrast: hue, brightness and saturation. If it is used as a tool for colour term elicitation it cannot help to discover color categories that discriminate degrees of brightness and saturation, or other sensory dimensions such as texture, transparency, lustre, illumination, location, duration, and fluctuation. As well, the lexemes that encode these other sensory dimensions are typically polymorphemic, so such colour terms are excluded from the basic colour system.

Colour terms in Maya languages

Colour is an important focus in Mayan cultures. For example, in Tzeltal, Hunn (1977:89) found that the five basic colour terms figure in 217 of 586 animal naming responses of composite forms he recorded, e.g., cahal nuk' toht [cahal "red" + nuk' "neck" toht "robin"] (89). It has been shown that Yucatec, Itzaj, Mopán, and Tzotzil (in Bricker 1999, Hofling and Tesucún 1997, Ulrich and Ulrich 1976, and Haviland 1981) extend the basic Mayan colour palette to include terms that express intensity, texture, opacity, relative size, discreteness, and texture. These languages use compounding of colour terms with other roots and the affixation of special colour suffixes to create words that make these distinctions. Some of these languages use reduplication to express degrees of saturation. For example:

> Yuc. *k'áan-hep'-é7en* "deep yellow" < *k'áan* "yellow" + *hep'* "tighten, squeeze" + *-é7en* (Bricker 1999: 285)
>
> Itz. *k'än-jop'-e7en* "bright yellow (flame of fire)"< *k'än* "yellow" + *jop*""light" + *-e7en* (Hofling p.c., cited in Bricker 1999:290)
>
> Mop. *chun-tuj-e7en* "yellowish, golden" < *chun* "yellow + *tuj* "unspec. meaning + *-e7en* (Ulrich and Ulrich 1976:79)

Tzo. *k'an-kep-an* "yellow (bunch of bananas)"< *k'an* "yellow" + *kep* "bunch" + *-an* (Haviland 1975:172)

Lacandon

Lacandon uses similar morphological processes to extend its basic colour palette to include terms that express degrees of saturation and luminosity, translucence, texture, shape, and location or position.

The consultants used in this study were Sakhol Garcia Paniagua, male, aged 23 and Marta Trujillo Gonzales, female, aged 20. Both are bilingual in Spanish and Lacandon.

The system of colour categorization in Lacandon

Basic colour terms

chak~chäk "red"
k'än "yellow"
yaax "blue/green"
7ek' "black"
sak~säk "white"

Reduplicated colour terms (express degree of saturation)

Very saturated: chäk-chäk "red-red, very red" (note: not as red as ne chäk "very red")
Less saturated: chä-chäk "sort of red"

The same CVC- and CV- patterns occur with the other basic colour roots.

Compounds (main colour term + lexical root + -e7en colour adjective)[1]

ch'ay "hanging?" (cf. ch'uy "hang")

chäk=ch'ay-e7 "red (fruit on tree: e.g. hanging)"
yaax=ch'ay-e7 "green (fruit on tree)"

hay "spread out, extended; thin (transparent?)"

chäk=hay-e7 "red (fruits) spread out (on the ground)"

säk=hay-e7 "clear (sky)"
yaax=hay-e7n "s.t. thin green"
k'än=hay-e7 "yellow (ripe fruit)"
chäk=hay-e7 "s.t. red (spread out on the ground, like tomatoes)"
7ek'=hay-e7 "black (seeds) spread out (on the ground, like chankala7 'false ginger' seeds)"
säk=hay-e7 "s.t. white spread out (like the vomit of a sick child)"

k'äl "lock, close"
chäk=k'äl-e7 "red inside the bottom of the eye lid"
yaax=k'äl-e7 "all blue sky (with no clouds)"

pos "pale, colourless"
yaax=pos-e7 "pale blue" (B25 on Munsell colour chart)
säk=pos-e7 "off-white"(C on Munsell colour chart)

puk' "dissolve, mix"
yaax-puk'-e7 "blue-purple"(E32 on Munsell colour chart)

til "dull?" (cf. til [used in colour compounds to express dull colours] (Bricker 1998:276))
chak=til-e7 (D6, D36-40) [deep coral, pink moving toward orange]
yaax=til-e7 (C20, C21) [aquamarine]

t'in "shine, reflect" (refers to luminous colour)
sak=t'in-e7 "brilliant, shimmer (?)"
chak=t'in-e7 "shiny red; luminescent red"
7ek'=t'in-e7 "shiny black, glossy black"
yaax k'En=t'in-e7 [shiny green yellow sample][2]
yaax sak=t'in-e7 "brilliant green"
k'än=t'in=e7 "luminescent yellow"
7ek' sak=t'in-e7 "brilliant black"
7ek'=t'in-e7 "luminescent black"
sak-sak=t'in-e7 "brilliant (luminescent) white"
yaax=t'in-e7 "luminous green (like fire light, or the colour of spirits)"

yul "smooth"
chäk=yul-e7 "smooth red (like the ground where a forest once stood)"
ne yaax=yul-e7 [dark green smooth sample]
yaax=yul-e7 [dark green felt sample]

sum "hang?" (cf. sum "rope" (Hofling 1997:568))
7ek'=sum-e7 "s.t. hanging black (e.g. fruit)"
yaax=sum-e7 "s.t. hanging green (e.g. fruit)"

hal "bright, glow, blaze"
chak=hal-e7 "red-hot coals"
yaax=hal-e7 " glowing green (like the colour of the cross-section of a mineral)"
yaax=hal-e7 "luminescent green"

hup "light; when the fire starts to burn, grow"
chak=hup-e7 "red (clouds at sunrise/sunset)"
k'än=hup-e7 "yellow (clouds at sunset/sunrise)"
säk=hup-e7 " brilliant white (of a rock face)"

yub "?"[medium gray tone]
7ek'=yub-e7 "not very black" (G on Munsell chart)
chak=yub-e7 "not very red" (E1) [medium-tone orange-red]
yaax=yub-e7 "not very green"(G20, C21) [medium green, light aquamarine]
chak ek'=yub-e7 "medium black red"(I1) [burnt sienna]
k'än=yub-e7 "dark yellow" (D9, D10) [mustard]
sak=yub-e7 "dark white" (B)
sak ek'=yub-e7 "darker white" (F)

pal "lacking colour?" (cf. pil [indicating lighter shades] (Bricker 1998:216))
sak=pal-e7 "pale (face)"
yaax sak=pal-en [light gray-green sample]

wol "round, circle"
yaax=wol-e7 "black eye, bruise"

lah "all, completely"
chak=lah-e7 "red (rash)"

ul "small and clustered (on a bush)?" (cf. ul "fatten" (Hofling 1997:651))
chäk=ul-e7 "red all around, bunches of red (fruits), e.g., tomatoes on a bush"

ch'ul "wet"
yaax=ch'ul-e7 "wet green"

Comparative data. Lacandon has colour compounds related to compounds in other Yucatecan languages and Tzotzil, a Cholan-Tzeltalan language. However, the specified colors may not be the same.

Lacandon	**Itzaj**
chak=hup-e7 "red (clouds)"	chäk=jop-e'en "red (flames of fire, clouds)"
chak=hal-e7 "red-hot (coals)"	chäk=jol-e'en "red (flames of fire, clouds)"
ya7ax=hal-e7 "luminescent green"	ya'ax=jol-e'en "blue,green (flames of fire), green (clouds)"

Lacandon	**Yucatec**
sak=pal-e7 “pale (face)”	sak=pil-é7en “gray, pale (person from fright)”
ya7ax=puk’-e7“blue-purple” (E32)	yá7ax=puk’-é7en “faded green”
ya7ax=til-e7 (C20-21)	yá7ax=til-é7en “olive green”
chak=til=e7 “almost red; not v. sat.”	chak=til-é7en “dull red”
chak=yul-e7 “smooth red”	chak=yul-é7en “raw red”
sak=pos-e7 “off-white” (C)	sak=pos-é7en “whitish”
ya7ax=pos-e7 “pale blue”(B25)	yá7ax=pos-é7en “gray-green”

Lacandon	**Tzotzil**
ya7ax=puk’-e7“blue-purple” (E32)	yax=puk’-an “clear (water)”
k’än=hay-e7 “yellow (ripe fruit)”	k’an=hay-an “transparently yellow”

There are lexical roots in Lacandon that cannot be compounded with colour, but which can enter into colour compounds in Yucatec and/or Itzaj:
ch’uy “suspend”
hats’ “hit,beat, whip”
hep’ “tight at waist”
chup’ “swell”
p’uch “thrash, beat”
7el “burn”
p’ox “break out in a rash, raised bumps on the skin (not red)”
mäk’ “lick, eat fruit”

Conclusions

Mayan languages use special morphological processes to extend basic colour categories. Lacandon uses these processes, extending its colour palette to encode shape, texture, translucence, relative size and discreteness of objects, and position. The encoding of these perceptual dimensions in colour terminology is productive, identifying categories with contrasting features of colour, other than brightness, hue, and saturation. Luminosity, for example, is an important dimension in Mayan colour categorization. This and other dimensions could never be discovered using only the Munsell colour system as an elicitation tool.

When comparing related data from different languages, the colours identified are often quite different even when the morphemes are the same. That is, the systems for creating descriptive colour terms match, but the referent colours often do not.

Because similar morphological processes of colour identification and classification exist in the Yucatecan languages and in Tzotzil, which is a Cholan-Tzeltalan language, this must be an old pattern in Mayan.

More research needs to be carried out on colour terms in Lacandon, to determine the number and range of lexical roots involved in colour categorization. This will uncover the features that are important in the Lacandon color system.

Notes

[1] Lexical roots are from a number of categories such as N, V, A.

[2] This and following colours that include the term **sample** were elicited with the help of color fabric samples that uncover sensory attributes outside the Munsell system.

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