

EMOTIONS IN ENGLISH AND BULGARIAN IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS WITH COLOURS

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Abstract. This article explores how idiomatic expressions featuring the colours black and white convey meaning, emotions, and cultural symbolism in Bulgarian and English. These colours evoke a broad range of connotations, from purity and success to negativity, mystery, and hardship. The study classifies these idioms into groups based on their meanings – positive, negative, neutral, or contradictory – and examines both the similarities and differences between the two languages. While Bulgarian and English share some idioms with overlapping meanings (e.g., „**черен пазар**“ and “black market”), others highlight unique cultural perspectives and linguistic creativity. Bulgarian idioms often possess a poetic, metaphorical tone, whereas English expressions tend to be more direct, practical, or linked to specific contexts, such as history, trade, or everyday life. These differences reflect the interaction between universal human experiences and distinct cultural influences in shaping language. By analysing these vivid phrases, the article reveals how language captures cultural attitudes towards colour and the emotional nuances associated with them. The analysis ultimately provides insights into the shared human tendency to express meaning through colour symbolism while highlighting the cultural specificities that make each language distinctive.

Keywords: Idiomatic expressions; colour symbolism; Bulgarian language; English language; black and white idioms; cultural differences

Introduction

As it is well known among scholars working not only in the field of linguistics but also in anthropology, ethnology, and related disciplines, language and culture are two distinct conceptual systems that correlate at a certain level of interdependence (Nida 2003, pp. 423 – 424), (Seide 2022, p. 150), (Seide 2024, p. 143). The relationship between language and culture, particularly concerning the perception of colour and the symbolism embedded in the lexemes of colour signifiers, has been an interesting research object for decades. When examined in

detail, it becomes clear that colour symbolism may be expressed in two ways – non-verbally (as a part of the traditional folklore costume, for instance, in the so-called “shevitsi” that represents specific embroidery patterns) or verbally. The perception and semantics of colour terms vary not only across different languages but also throughout different periods of a nation’s development, reflecting the way of life of its speakers (Metz 2010, p. 158). This is why the meaning and symbolism of colour concepts in the mythological worldview differ from those in modern perceptions of colour (Logvynenko 2018, pp. 13 – 14). For example, the symbolic background of the lexeme “grey” was initially associated with mourning and remorse. In contrast, in the Christian tradition, it later came to symbolise the immortality of the soul (Kuper 1993, p. 234).

The process of globalisation and the easy access to information of any kind enable people to compare different cultures more quickly and unconsciously, leading to the identification of cultural universals. Colour theory is no exception. As a result, more and more subcultural universals are emerging in individual studies.

According to the theory of Berlin and Kay, presented in the study *Basic Colour Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berlin and Kay 1991), colour terms are universal and are classified into primary and secondary/compound colours. The number of primary colours never exceeds 11 in any language, and their order of emergence is as follows: white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and grey. All other colours are considered secondary or compound (Berlin and Kay 1991, pp. 2 – 3), (Logvynenko 2018, p. 12), (Petkova 2019, p. 271), (Vlahova-Angelova 2014, pp. 136 – 137).

Berlin and Kay (1991) also established the following principles:

All languages contain terms for ‘white’ and ‘black’;

If a language contains three colour terms, one of them is ‘red’;

If a language contains four terms, it includes either ‘green’ or ‘yellow’ (but not both);

If a language contains five terms, it includes both ‘green’ and ‘yellow’;

If a language contains six terms, it includes ‘blue’;

If a language contains seven terms, it includes ‘brown’;

If a language contains eight or more terms, it includes ‘purple’, ‘pink’, ‘orange’, ‘grey’, or a combination of these.

These colours have been present in mythology and folklore, where they have been preserved to the present day. However, it is essential to emphasise that in these contexts, colour terms are often linked to ancient traditions and the magical power of words. This connection has been encoded and preserved in Bulgarian personal names, for instance.

It is not difficult to uncover the hidden meanings behind names derived from lexemes denoting colour. Such names are generally associated with physical human features. According to old folklore beliefs, white, yellow, and pink symbolise

physical beauty (white skin, blonde hair, pink lips), while red and scarlet indicate good health. In contrast, black is traditionally regarded as a symbol of ugliness. However, children were sometimes named after it to protect them from evil forces such as the evil eye, bad thoughts, diseases, and even death (Petkova 2019, p. 271).

It is also interesting to note that in some cultures, colours serve not only to describe physical traits but also to name cardinal directions, represent taste perceptions, or convey emotions associated with specific places or regions (Vlahova-Angelova 2014, p. 149).

The common feature in all these uses of colour lexemes is that they express emotions, be they positive or negative.

Aims and scopes

The focus of this study is idiomatic phrases containing colour terms. The goal is to analyse their extralinguistic meaning – whether they express a positive or negative emotion, or whether they may be perceived as offensive. Additionally, it is interesting to determine if these idioms can be translated while preserving the emotional nuance they convey.

This study draws a parallel between English, a global lingua franca, and Bulgarian, a smaller Slavic language spoken in the Balkans, which has been influenced by the cultures of other nations in the region.

These two languages have distinct linguistic backgrounds and serve as tools for illustrating the worldviews of two European cultural areas – the Slavic and Anglo-Saxon traditions.

Colour terms have both literal and figurative meanings (Vlahova-Angelova 2014, p. 130). It is well known that lexemes denoting colours are frequently used in a metaphorical sense – i.e., with a “non-colour” meaning (Vlahova-Angelova 2014, p. 132). This can be observed in idiomatic phrases, which reflect not only universal linguistic tendencies but also culture-specific elements (Vlahova-Angelova 2014, p. 149).

Sources for the idiom collection include phraseological dictionaries (in Bulgarian and English) as well as articles by linguists specialising in idioms and colour symbolism.

The primary research methods employed are lexicographical analysis and, where possible, etymological and semantic analysis.

Classifications of idiomatic expressions

Colours carry a wide range of meanings and associations, many of which are vividly reflected in idiomatic expressions. In this study, we have gathered idioms that feature the colours “black” and “white” in both Bulgarian and English. We aim to classify these expressions based on their meanings, emotional undertones, and symbolic associations while examining the similarities and differences that emerge between the two languages.

These two colours – “black” and “white” – hold universal symbolism yet are interpreted and applied differently across cultures. Black, often associated with darkness, mystery, or misfortune, and white, symbolising purity, clarity, or simplicity, serve as powerful tools for expressing complex ideas in idiomatic language. By examining these expressions, we seek not only to understand the shared human experience they represent but also to highlight the unique cultural perspectives that give them their distinctive flavour in Bulgarian and English.

Colours typically provoke a variety of associations that differ among individuals, but within the same cultural group, these associations tend to be strikingly similar (Metz 2010, p. 157). When compared across different cultural contexts, however, the symbolic arrangement of colours varies, reflecting the diverse ways of life (Metz 2010, p. 158). Colour perception is shaped, on the one hand, by objective factors, and on the other, by the subject’s personal experience, which is closely linked to cultural traditions. As previously noted, some colours and colour combinations evoke positive associations, while others are associated with adverse reactions (Metz 2010, p. 159).

Metaphorical transference occurs when the lexeme “black” is used as an adjective, emphasising its extralinguistic meaning to signify the area of lowest brightness (lightness) in the spatial colour diagram. Low light defines dark, gloomy colours, with black itself representing the most extreme. Consequently, black is also linked to saturation, intensity of negative emotional and psychological states, unpleasant sensory experiences, and morally reprehensible actions. This is why black is traditionally associated with negative connotations. Its emotional-psychological perception relates to its optical properties: low or absent illumination disrupts one of the main sensory perceptions – vision (including colour vision), causing psychological discomfort, insecurity, and fear (Krasteva 2010, p. 129).

Conversely, the colour “white” can be viewed as “the counterpart to “black” on the luminance axis of the three-dimensional colour chart”, characterised by the highest degree of saturation. It is also defined as the “zero degree of colour” (ibidem).

While this study primarily focuses on “black” and “white,” we have also collected idiomatic expressions involving other major colours, including “red,” “blue,” “yellow,” “green,” and “grey.” These will be the subject of future analysis, exploring how colours shape and reflect cultural identity through language.

Additionally, this work touches on how colour-related idioms function as linguistic markers of shared human values, cultural attitudes, and historical contexts. We aim to shed light on how language bridges cultural differences while preserving unique traditions and perspectives by analysing these expressions in tandem.

Classification of Idioms with “Black” in Bulgarian and English:

1. Literal Blackness or Physical Darkness

Examples of idioms describing literal blackness or extreme darkness are:

Bulgarian:

Черен като гарван.

Черен като крило на гарван.

Черен като главня.

Черен като катран.

Черен като кютюк.

Черен като смола.

Черен като на тигана дъното.

English:

(As) black as a raven’s wing.

(As) black as pitch.

(As) black as Newgate’s knocker.

Jet black.

(As) black as the ace of spades.

2. Symbolism of Evil, Negativity, or Danger

These are idioms using “black” to symbolize misfortune, danger, or malice:

Bulgarian:

Дяволът не е толкова черен, какъвто го пишат.

Черен като дявол.

Роден в черен петък.

Роден в черен вторник.

English:

The black ox has trod upon (one’s) foot.

A black day.

Of the blackest dye.

(As) black as thunder.

3. Negative Emotions or Depressive States

Idioms related to sadness, pessimism, or gloomy moods include:

Bulgarian:

На черна вълна съм.

Светът ми се вижда черен.

Черно ми е пред очите.

English:

The black dog.

A black cloud.

Look (as) black as thunder.

4. Criticism, Judgment, or Moral Irony

Idioms used for moral or personal critique, often highlighting hypocrisy, are as follows.

Bulgarian:

Присмяло се гърнето на котела, че е черен.

На черното викам бяло.

Черна точка.

English:

The pot calling the kettle black.

Paint (one) black.

A black mark beside (one's) name.

5. Misfortune, Poverty, and Hardship

The idioms in this group reflect life's struggles, bad luck, or socioeconomic challenges:

Bulgarian:

С черен повой ме е повила майка ми.

Дърпам черен боб.

Бели пари за черни дни.

English:

A black day.

Black-collar workers (manual labourers in industries like mining).

6. Illicit or Secretive Activities

Examples of idioms involving illegal, hidden, or unethical behaviour, include:

Bulgarian:

На черна борса.

Черен пазар.

Записвам в черния списък.

English:

Black market.

Black money.

Black book.

7. Grim Humour or Tragedy

The idioms in this group reflect dark humour or events with a tragicomic undertone:

Bulgarian:

Черен хумор.

Черно чернило.

English:

Black humor.

Black comedy.

8. Superstition, Fate, or Religion

The following idiomatic expressions are tied to cultural beliefs, superstition, or religious motifs:

Bulgarian:

Мина ми черна котка път.

Слагам в черния тефтер.

Родил съм се в черен вторник.

English:

Black Friday (historical superstition).

Back of the black stump (remote, almost mystical location).

9. Fashion, Sophistication, or Modernity

Idioms that are related to elegance, formality, or modern trends, are:

Bulgarian:

Черна кърпа. (symbolic mourning)

English:

Black tie.

Little black book.

The new black.

10. Valuable or Rare Resources

The following idioms describe highly valuable commodities or rare events:

Bulgarian:

Черно злато.

English:

Black gold (oil).

Black swan (a rare, unexpected event).

11. Unwanted Relationships or Divisions

Examples of idioms about strained relationships, alienation, or divisiveness, include:

Bulgarian:

Минава черна котка помежду ни (a quarrel or fight over something insignificant).

Ни чер, ни бял (indefinite).

English:

Black sheep.

There is a black sheep in every flock.

Similarities in Idioms with “Black”:

Physical or Literal Blackness

Bulgarian: „Черен като гарван“

English: “As black as a raven’s wing”

Symbolism of Negativity and Misfortune

Bulgarian: „Роден в черен петък“ – (bad luck).

English: “A black day” – (a day of sorrow or misfortune).

Shared Metaphorical Uses: Guilt or Criticism

Bulgarian: „Присмяло се гърнето на котела, че е черен“

English: “The pot calling the kettle black.”

Emotional States and Humor

Bulgarian: „На черна вълна съм“ – feeling depressed; „черен хумор“.

English: “Black humor” – grim or morbid humor.

Cultural and Environmental Influences

Bulgarian: „С черен повой ме е повила майка ми“ – born into hardship.

English: “The black dog” – originally linked to folklore as an omen, later associated with clinical depression, reflecting existential struggles.

Specific Cultural Contexts

Bulgarian Examples:

„Биволицата е черна, а бяло мляко дава“ emphasises moral lessons.

„Бели пари за черни дни“ highlights prudence, foresight, and resilience in the face of hardship. Its meaning and significance are deeply rooted in traditional Bulgarian values, where saving and preparing for uncertain or difficult times are vital, especially in a historically agrarian society with limited resources.

„Подмятам някого като черно бакърче надолу-нагоре.“

Classification of Idioms with “White” in Bulgarian and English:

1. Common Themes:

Purity/Goodness

Bulgarian: „Като бял човек“ (civilized, proper).

English: “As white as the driven snow” (pure).

Uniqueness/Exception

Bulgarian: „Бяла врана“ (white crow – oddity).

English: “Great white hope” (special exception).

Stress/Aging

Bulgarian: „Бяла коса да не видиш“ (curse to die young).

„Бяла брада, жълти лайна“ (when an old marries a young woman and has a baby)

English: “Turned his hair white” (caused stress).

Behavioural Traits

Bulgarian: „(развявам) бял флаг, бяло знаме“.

English: “White flag (peace, surrender)

2. Bulgarian-Specific Idioms

„Съшит с бял конец“ – poorly concealed deceit (reflects skepticism in Bulgarian culture toward dishonesty or poorly disguised lies).

„Виждам/видя бяла бога“ – to act in vain or achieve nothing (likely tied to the hardships faced by Bulgarians in daily life, especially in rural areas).

„Виждам/видя бял бивол по пладне“ / „бял вълк посред пладне“ – to pay dearly or get what one deserves.

„Хващат ме белите братя“ – to lose one’s mind or act irrationally.

„Похвалил се циганин с бял гъз“ – boasting about something trivial or not impressive.

„Бяло магаре в чердата“ – leader.

3. English-Specific Idioms

“Hit the white” – To be correct on target (originates from archery, where the bull’s-eye was white. Reflects a focus on precision and success in Western culture).

“(Little) white lie” – a small, harmless lie.

“White elephant” – a costly and burdensome possession (rooted in the historical practice of gifting rare white elephants in Southeast Asia, with Western adoption as a metaphor).

Conclusions

The analysis of idiomatic expressions containing the colours “black” and “white” in Bulgarian and English reveals how deeply colour symbolism is embedded in language and culture. These idioms not only express emotions and states of being but also reflect historical and social perspectives unique to each linguistic community.

1. Black and White Idioms as Emotional Polarities

The contrast between black and white in idiomatic usage mirrors their symbolic opposition in many cultures.

White is commonly associated with purity, clarity, and positivity. In Bulgarian, „Като бял човек“ describes someone behaving in a civilized and proper manner, while in English, “(As) white as (the) driven snow” conveys extreme purity or innocence.

Black, on the other hand, often denotes negativity, concealment, or rebellion. The Bulgarian expression „Черен ми е светът“ illustrates deep pessimism, whereas the English phrase “black sheep” refers to an outcast within a group.

2. Symbolic Expression of Colours

Colour symbolism manifests both verbally, through idioms, and non-verbally, in cultural customs.

Verbal expression: Idioms such as „развявам бяло знаме“ (Bulgarian) and “white flag” (English) symbolize surrender or peace, demonstrating shared cultural associations.

Non-verbal expression: Wearing black for mourning is a tradition found in both Bulgarian and Western customs, showing an overlap in symbolic meaning.

3. Cultural Development and Colour Perception

Cultural history plays a significant role in shaping colour-related idioms.

Bulgarian idioms like „виждам бяла бога“ (to act in vain) reflect historical hardships and rural lifestyles.

Some expressions, such as „бяла брада, жълти лайна“ and „като агуптина с белия гъз“, are particularly vivid and direct, reflecting a tendency toward blunt, metaphorical imagery.

In contrast, English idioms like “white lie” demonstrate cultural norms favoring politeness and discretion.

4. Influence of Globalization and Subcultural Universality

While some idioms have become globally recognized, others remain culturally specific. Expressions such as “black sheep” have spread internationally, illustrating increasing cultural overlap. On the other hand, unique idioms remain tied to local histories, such as the Bulgarian phrase „Съшит с бял конец“ (poorly concealed deceit), which has no direct English equivalent.

Overall, idioms featuring black often evoke themes of mystery, misfortune, or hidden depths, while white represents a spectrum of meanings, from purity and clarity to irony and paradox. The classification of white-related idioms further illustrates how these expressions reflect different aspects of life, culture, and emotion in both languages.

5. Idioms with “White” in Bulgarian and English

White is a powerful linguistic symbol, appearing in idioms that express positive, neutral, negative, contradictory, or rare concepts.

Positive white idioms symbolize success, joy, and good fortune, such as „родил съм се на бял покров“ (born under a lucky star) and “A white Christmas” (a peaceful, snow-covered holiday).

Neutral white idioms describe everyday situations or states of being, such as „бял кахър“ (a trivial worry) and “white paper” (an official report).

Negative white idioms reflect hardship or loss, as seen in „бял ден да не видиш“ (to never experience happiness) and “white-knuckler” (a tense or frightening situation).

Contradictory white idioms highlight irony or distortion of truth, including „на черното викам бяло“ (calling black white) and “Swear black is white” (insisting on a falsehood).

Rare and metaphorical white imagery express uniqueness or improbability, as in „да видиш бял бивол по пладне“ (an impossible event) and “chow the white feather” (revealing cowardice).

6. Comparison of Bulgarian and English Idioms with “White”

Despite linguistic differences, both Bulgarian and English idioms with white share common themes:

a. Purity and Innocence: Expressions like „бял като сняг“ and “as white as snow” convey ideas of cleanliness and virtue.

b. Revelation or clarity: idioms such as „изкарвам на бял свят“ and “put something down in black and white” highlight transparency and truth.

c. Rarity and exceptionality: both cultures use imagery of uncommon white birds – „бяла лястовица“ (white swallow) in Bulgarian and “white raven” in English, to describe something rare or special.

To sum up, this comparative study highlights that, while idioms often arise from universal human experiences, they also bear the cultural and historical imprint

of the languages to which they belong. The analysis of black-and-white idioms reveals not only linguistic parallels but also how different societies assign symbolic and emotional significance to colours. Ultimately, these idioms offer a compelling lens through which to explore both the shared human tendency to express meaning through colour and the unique cultural nuances that shape language.

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