The Absence of Color Concept in Pelauw Language (an NSM Approach)

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ABSTRACT

The notion of colour has been an interesting yet controversial topic especially in the field of linguistics. Some scholars (Berlin and Kay, 1969) argued that every human being should have an insight of the basic colour terms as the universal inventory since the beginning. While other scholar (Wierzbicka, 1996) argued that rather than the colour concept as an inherent nature, it should be a dependant nature in which its terms was emerged because of what have been seen before. This long debate over the colour concept ties to a phenomenon that occurs in one of the indigenous languages in the Eastern part of Indonesia, namely Pelauw. This language apparently does not have any colour terms in its vocabulary as all the words for colour found in this language are borrowed from Bahasa Indonesia. To investigate this strange phenomenon, therefore, this paper will aim to examine the absence of colour concept in Pelauw language, and to use Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014) for analyzing the terms 'manggahina' and 'mete' which are somehow used to address white and black colours, respectively. This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to explain the phenomenon under study using NSM, which in this case, the absence of colour concept in Pelauw language. The results show that colour concept is not something which universally exists to begin with, instead, it is just a result of what have been seen through the vision that visualised and emerged as the colour terms. It is attested through the analysis of terms 'manggahina' and 'mete' using NSM which concludes that these terms are rather a visual descriptor than a colour concept.

1. Introduction

Colour is an interesting topic which has been a controversy for decades since some scholars argue that it is a universal concept, while the others argue that there is no such a colour universal concept. Berlin and Kay (1969) asserted that there are eleven basic colour categories known as 'universal inventory' that exist for all humans, in which they are white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and grey. They also argued that even though languages across the world differently encode their own number of basic colour categories in their vocabularies, yet the exact eleven or fewer basic colour terms from the universal inventory are always drawn (Saysani et al., 2021; Rahman & Weda, 2019; Wicaksono et al., 2021; Andini et al., 2022). It means that every human being should have an insight of the basic colour terms as the universal inventory from the beginning (Huettig et al., 2020; Wicaksono et al., 2020; Siuda-Krzywicka et al., 2020). In opposite, Wierzbicka (2005, p. 239) said that "there are no 'color universals' because 'color' itself is not a universal concept".

What is universal is the concept of SEEing, and so SEEing, not color, must be the starting point, and the cornerstone, of our investigations". It appears that what she has implied is contradicted with what Berlin and Kay have argued, because rather than the colour concept as an inherent nature, it should be a dependant nature in which its terms are emerged because of the concept of SEEing, or what have been seen before. This argument concurs with Heider's work (1972) in Dani language that only has two colour terms, *mili* and *mola*, in which these terms do not correspond or equivalent to any English colour words, and do not separate colour from other visual properties or what they are seeing. For instance, mili means light and warm colors, while *mola* means dark shades and cool colors. Since Dani two colour terms *mili* and *mola* are the terms which are attached into light and shadow, they are obviously global visual descriptors, and not solely a colour terms. Another study from Gleason (1955) also supports this argument as the study reveals that in Bassa language from Liberia, there are only two terms used to describe colour concepts, which are *hui* and *ziza*. Hui refers to a darker spectrum of a colour (e.g. black, violet, blue, and green), while in contrast, *ziza* is addressed for a

colour with a brighter spectrum (e.g. white, yellow, orange, and red). Similar result also comes from a research conducted by Zahan (1951) concerning Bambara language, which only has three colour terms: *dyema*, that corresponds to cotton; *blema*, that is related to something shade or pale; and *fima*, which ties to a pitch black.

Based on the previous studies conducted on Dani, Bassa, and Bambara language regarding colour concept, it appears that the same phenomenon also *accurs* in a local language called Pelauw, which is one of the languages in the Eastern part of Indonesia, Moluccas. It is found out that this language does not have any colour terms at all. It can be noticed from the way people in Pelauw prefer to address entire colour terms using borrowing words from Bahasa Indonesia – a language that is nationally used as a standard language and approved as a lingua franca for Indonesian – to complete of the absence of the colour meaning in Pelauw. In short, similar with the case of Dani, Bassa, and Bambara, Pelauw only has two terms which might or might not be related to the colour concept, in which they are manggahina and mete that will be investigated in the later part.

2. Methodology

In response to the problems arise on the previous section, the main objective of this paper is to examine and explicate the absence of colour concept in Pelauw language, as well as to analyze the terms *manggahina* and *mete* using a method in a theory called Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014) to determine whether these terms are intended for colour or just global visual descriptors. This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to explain the phenomenon under study using NSM, which in this case, the absence of color concept in Pelauw language. First of all, NSM is one of the approaches in linguistics field that tries to diminish the semantics meaning of a lexical item within the scope of semantic 65 primes. These primes are believed to be universally produced in each and every existing language, and must be equivalently translated in every language which makes them irreplaceable with other words. As Goddard (2006) said, even if the languages are different one another, all of them must be identical in a small part of its core that share the same meaning (semantic primes), as the meaning itself has a solid linguistic exponent in a form of a word or word-like expression that expresses throughout any language which is defined as a universal grammar. For details, these 65 primes are listed in the following table:

Table 1. 65 Semantic Primes

i, you, someone, something~thing, people, body	substantives
kinds, parts	relational substantives
this, the same, other~else	determiners
one, two, some, all, much~many, little~few	quantifiers
good, bad	Evaluators
big, small	Descriptors
know, think, want, don't want, feel, see, hear	mental predicates
say, words, true	speech
do, happen, move	actions, events, movement
be (somewhere), there is, be (someone/something)	location, existence, specification
(IS) mine	possession
live, die	life and death
when~time, now, before, after, a long time, a short time, for some time, moment	time
where~place, here, above, below, far, near, side, inside, touch	place
not, maybe, can, because, if	logical concepts
very, more	augmentor, intensifier

like	similarity

Source: Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2014.

The left column of the table above shows 65 primes that are similar by meaning across all language. And by using these core primes, the method will utilize some of them to form explications, which later describe a semantic meaning based on a set of primes. The explications will elaborate the meaning of a lexical item into its primes and try to decipher and analyze human conceptualization towards an object that priorly has no meaning, which in this case, the colour terms in Pelauw language. Simply put, this missing colour concept can be further explicated through NSM using its 65 semantic primes.

For addition, there is also semantic molecules that are intermediary words used to explicate meaning in a more complex way. These molecules include the aspects of Body parts, Physical, Spatial, Environmental, Times, Fire and Water, Biological, Biosocial, Materials, Knowing and Naming, and Doing (Goddard, 2007). Despite not being considered as semantic primes, they can work together with primes to form more detailed explications. Each semantic molecule also acts as a supporting word that is essential to further explain other words outside the primes' domain. It is important to note that molecules are marked with [M] in explications.

3. Result and Discussion

This section will be a discussion regarding the absence of colour concept in Pelauw language and the analysis of the terms *manggahina* and *mete* that might or might not be associated with the colour concept. Based on the researcher's experience as the native speaker of Pelauw language, the whole colour terms that tend to be used in a daily conversation are actually loanwords from Bahasa Indonesia. For example, English equivalent for *putih* is White, *hitam* is Black, *merah* is Red, *biru* is Blue, *hijau* is Green, and *kuning* is Yellow. These all the words that are used by the native speaker of Pelauw in addressing color terms. But it gives rise a question, why do they tend to use colour words from Bahasa Indonesia? This inquiry indicates that Pelauw language certainly does not have any colour terms at all from the start, or perhaps, every single person in Pelauw does not need these colour terms to begin with. If this is truly the case, then the concept of universal colour inventory is questionable since there is no such colour inventory in Pelauw language's vocabulary.

A significant evidence leads a speculation that colour concept does not exist in Pelauw can be seen from their traditional food called *lapia*. This food is a transparent, jelly-like substance made from a condensed Sago tree which served as their main dish – replacing rice that is a typical main dish for most of the Asians – along with fish and cassava. Its transparent characteristic signaling that Pelauw people do not have any insight regarding food-colouring process like the others do. If people know how to make colour enrichment into their dishes, let say red curry or green curry for instance, this means they do have a prior knowledge about colour. According to Uemura (cited in McNeill, 1972, p.26), there are three basic colour terms in Japan and all of them are derived from indigenous plants of which natural dyes are extracted. They are aka/red dye from the roots of *Akane* plant, ao/blue *dye* from *Hanada* plant, and ki/yellow *dye* from *Kariyasu* plant. This finding suggests that Japanese are able to extract dyes from the certain plants because they do have several words for colour in their vocabulary. While in contrast to Pelauw people, they are unable to make any dyes for colouring their transparent-like food such as *lapia* because they do not have any basic colour terms.

Another strong evidence can be seen from Pelauw's traditional clothing known as *maenta kabasarang*. The clothing right from the top to bottom – headband, scarf, shirt, waistband, and pants – are purely white or colourless, indicating that they are unaware of the existence of colour, as there are no any combination of colors found in their clothing. In consequence, this rises an assumption that the colour terms in existence in Pelauw society is not merely because they do not have any understanding regarding the concept of colour or even colour blind, but instead, the colour itself does not give any contribution in terms of clothing and foods colouring.

A. Discussion of the terms *manggahina* and *mete*

Despite Bahasa Indonesia has been used to describe the whole colour terms in Pelauw, it is found that certain people also use the term *manggahina* to refer white colour, and mete to black colour. Although the rest prefer to use Bahasa Indonesia for colour words, yet the fact that *manggahina* and mete are also being used as a reference to white and black gives rise a curiosity. Basically, the terms of *putih* corresponds to white and *hitam* corresponds to black, but there is no any near equivalent meaning for *manggahina* as *putih*/white, and *mete* as *hitam*/black. This is due to a fact

that the literal translation for *manggahina* and mete is differ from both basis colour words of putih/white and hitam/black, as these two terms are rather a visual descriptor than a colour concept.

Wierzbicka (2005, p.217) asserted that "Visual descriptors can be analyzed without reference to colour, on the basis of identifiable visual prototypes and the universal concept of seeing". This assertion ties to a fact that Pelauw people who do not pay any attention to colour have tried to relate *manggahina* and mete to any visual appearance they have seen, which is inadvertently included the characteristic of either white or black. So basically, the emergence of these two terms could be a description to what people in Pelauw have seen in the first place, not a reference to colour as an innate character which has been embedded into human perception.

Furthermore, the reason *manggahina* and mete are considered as the visual descriptors can be explained by their basis intended meaning. As a note, *manggahina* refers to bright, clean, and smooth skin of a person, while mete refers to dark, dirty, and dull skin of a person. It means that these terms are not specifically represent a colour, since they are more like a visual description towards something. This is a common understanding in Pelauw that a person (usually a female) who has a good-looking appearance because of having a bright, clean, and smooth skin tone will always be called as *manggahina*. On the other hand, a person (usually a male) who has an unattractive appearance because of having a dark, dirty, and dull skin tone will always be called as mete. Interestingly, these two terms are essentially related to the concept of SEEing. As *manggahina* refers to a person/a female who is seen as a pretty one, while mete refers to a person/a male who is seen as an ugly one. As a result, this strengthens the assumption of which *manggahina* and mete are rather a visual descriptor than a colour concept.

B. Analysis of *manggahina* and *mete* using NSM

In order to explicate the natural translation for *manggahina* and *mete*, NSM theory will be used as a tool of the analysis for constructing a cultural script of both terms to reveal how distinct they are compared to the other basic colour terms such as white and black (English), as well as *putih* and *hitam* (Bahasa Indonesia). For further details, here are the explications:

1) X is – *manggahina* =

people say X to someone if these people think about someone's body like this:

This someone has a bright [M] skin [M]

 This someone has a clean [M] skin [M]

 This someone has a smooth [m] skin [M]

 This someone has a white [M] skin [M]

people think about X if these people see someone like this:

This someone's body is very good

This someone is pretty [M]

this someone much more like women [M]

2) X is – mete =

a) people say X to someone if these people think about someone's body like this:

This someone has a dark [M] skin [M]

 This someone has a dirty [M] skin [M]

 This someone has a dull [M] skin [M]

 This someone has a black [M] skin [M]

b) people think about X if these people see someone like this:

This someone's body is very bad

This someone is ugly [M]

this someone much more like men [M]

The explication in (1) indicates that *manggahina* refers to the visual descriptors, or visual appearance (a) expressed by using semantic molecules [M], especially the body parts which in this case the skin tone of someone. And people's thought towards this someone (b) will be stimulated if these people see this someone as a pretty one, and somehow this someone is usually a woman (c). Meanwhile, the explication in (2) indicates that mete refers to the visual descriptors, or visual appearance (a) expressed by using semantic molecules [M], particularly the body parts which in this case the skin tone of someone. And also people's thought towards this someone (b) will be stimulated if these people see this someone as an ugly one, and somehow this someone is typically a man (c). Now let see the explications of colour terms for white and black.

3) white colour [English] =

a) people think about this colour [M] like this:

"it is like colour [M] of milk [M]"

b) at the same time, people can think about it like this:

"sometimes people can see something like this in a place where there is a cloud [M]"

4) black colour [English] =

a) people think about this colour [M] like this:

"it is like colour [M] of charcoal [M]"

b) at the same time, people can think about it like this:

"sometimes people can see something like this in someone's shadow [M]"

The explication in (3) shows that white is not relatable to *manggahina* (1) since they are mostly different in meanings. Albeit (1) mentioned white in its explication which is a part of semantic molecules, it still does not correspond to the semantic molecules milk and cloud as in (3), because (1) is more directly referred to someone's skin and appearance in which (3) does not have in its explication. The same condition is also showed in (4) as black is unrelatable to mete (2) because neither black nor mete has an equivalent translation. In short, even if (2) mentioned black into its explication as a part of semantic molecules, yet it does not have any correlation to the semantic molecules charcoal and shadow as in (4) since (2) is more likely related to someone's skin and appearance in which (4) never been mentioned in its explication. Lastly, let see the following explications of colour terms for *putih* and *hitam*.

5) *putih* colour [Indonesia] =

a) people think about this colour [M] like this:

"it is like colour [M] of bone [M]"

b) at the same time, people can think about it like this:

"it is like the colour [M] of the light [M]"

6) *hitam* colour [Indonesia] =

a) people think about this colour [M] like this:

"it is like colour [M] of coal [M]"

b) at the same time, people can think about it like this:

"it is like the colour [M] of the night [M]"

Based on the explication displayed above, even if *putih* and *manggahina* are the interchangeable terms that people in Pelauw use to define white colour, the explication in (5) shows that *putih* is not relevant to *manggahina* (1). As can be noticed *putih* links to a semantic molecule bone*/tulang*, which is a familiar visual descriptor commonly used in Indonesia to refer white along with blood/*darah* to refer red colour, – since *merah*/red and *putih*/white are colors of national flag of Indonesia – and light [M] which is usually seen and described as something white. These references are

more identical to the explication of white (3) wherein bone and milk can be related to white, and they also refer to some things, however, they are are not correlated to the visual appearance of someone as in *manggahina*.

The same issue also goes for *hitam* and mete which are the exchangeable terms that people in Pelauw use to define the black colour, so it is evident that *hitam* is irrelevant to mete (2). Based on the explication (6), *hitam* refers to a semantic molecule coal/*batu bara*, a prevalent visual descriptor often used in Indonesia to refer black colour, since coal is the type of rock in Indonesia mostly known for its nature in black. As well as night [M] which is directly connected to the blackened or darkened hours. The explications in (6) might sound familiar to black in terms of meaning which also refer to some things, but fundamentally, they have nothing to do with visual appearance of someone as in mete.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, NSM has attested that colour concept is not universal, as what Wierzbicka (2005) has emphasized on the title of her article "there are no colour universals, but there are universals of visual semantics". This emphasis is strengthened by the fact that colour concept is not something which universally exists to begin with, instead, it is just a result of what have been seen or witnessed through our vision which later visualized and emerged as the colour terms. Moreover, by analyzing the explication using NSM, it is proven that colour concept had been overlooked by people in Pelauw due to their unawareness of the colour existence in the past. Even for uncertain and questionable colour-related terms such as *manggahina* and mete in Pelauw which is considered as a cultural-specific – since only native Pelauw could comprehend the meaning of these terms – can be successfully explicated using the semantic primes and molecules which draws a conclusion that these colour terms are rather a visual descriptor than a colour concept.

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