

REVIEWS

The semantics of colour: A historical approach. By CAROLE P. BIGGAM. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. 257. ISBN 978052189925. \$99 (Hb).

Reviewed by DON DEDRICK, *University of Guelph*

Carole Biggam's *The semantics of colour* is an intelligent and useful book about contemporary research into the naming and categorization of color, with special attention to historical semantic studies of color. In her preface, B says she has three target audiences: (i) general readers with an interest in linguistics, (ii) university students of literature, linguistics, anthropology, and psychology with a concern for color, and (iii) semanticists, not color specialists. This said, the true audience for this book is the student or researcher (close to B's (ii)) who is engaged or intends to engage in historical color-language research. Virtually every section and chapter of this book ends with some advice to potential researchers, and B is, throughout the book, concerned to point to the kind of information the historical researcher has access to and the sort of research she cannot access, and to demonstrate a variety of methods for conducting historical color research. These are fundamental values of the book. Anyone who is investigating color language historically would benefit from reading B's book, for it is, in large part, a how-to for historical research into color categorization and naming—telling the reader how not to mess up one's understanding of these things, especially in historical contexts.

And how might one mess it up? Easily! Suppose you assume that English color terms and concepts that are hue-based provide the template for understanding color terms in other languages. 'Hue' is pretty much synonymous with 'color' in English and many other languages, to the point where it is difficult to define it independently: if hue is color for 'us', how do we abstract color from color? Yet it is clear that other languages stress other dimensions of perceptual or even non-perceptual experience in their classifications. B does a good job of asking us to imagine and appreciate color concepts (or as psychologists often say, 'categories') different from those based on hue (N.B. Ch. 1). If there is one home truth for the historical researcher, it is to not assume that color words in historical languages, with no native speakers for us to query, neatly correspond to a hue-based color system.

For those having even a slight familiarity with the linguistic, anthropological, and psychological literatures on color naming and categorization, there is an elephant in the room. That would be Brent Berlin and Paul Kay's influential text, *Basic color terms: Their universality and evolution* (1969). B writes that Berlin and Kay's book 'changed her life' (xi). This sounds dramatic, but this reviewer understands that dramatic claim. Berlin and Kay, love them or leave them, provided a framework within which to make sense of color terminology and color concepts—one that turns out to be especially useful for the historical semantics of color.

For those who need a Berlin and Kay refresher, or an introduction to this literature, the story goes, essentially, like this (but see B's Ch. 2 for a detailed account). Immediately prior to the publication of *Basic color terms* in 1969, color language and color concepts were viewed as a best-case argument for linguistic relativity. Color terms differ across languages, and the differences were viewed through the lens of culture. If a language does not discriminate, lexically, between red and yellow (if it has one word for the conjunction of red and yellow stimuli, as named by Modern English (ModE)), then that is because there is some historical, cultural reason why this is so. Berlin and Kay agreed that there was a great deal of cultural variation in color nomenclature, but they argued that if you place a filter on that great variable set, you will find that some color terms are special, more 'basic' than others. The basic terms, according to Berlin and Kay's set of linguistic and psychological criteria, number eleven ('black', 'white', 'gray', 'red', 'yellow', 'green', 'blue', 'orange', 'purple', 'pink', and 'brown'), and they claimed that EVERY language contains at most eleven and at least two basic color terms. Also, Berlin and Kay argued that there is an 'evolutionary sequence' through which the development of basic color terminology passes:

as a language adds more basic terms to its lexical stock, the additions will follow a predictable path of development.

The first half of *The semantics of colour* (B does not divide the book up as such, but it is an appropriate division) deals mainly with issues concerning basic color terms and, more generally, the universalist (i.e. Berlin and Kay) tradition in color-naming research. B shepherds us through the history of thought about color language: from William Gladstone (yes, THAT Gladstone) and his ideas about color language and perception in Homer to Berlin and Kay's influential work (Ch. 2). Ch. 3 is devoted to an account of the articulation and development over the past forty years of the concept of a basic color term. This is a superb chapter in which B casts a critical eye on the various criteria for basicness (of which she counts nineteen). For those interested in historical—indeed any—research into color naming, this chapter is definitive. Not only does the author clearly explain the cluster of concepts associated with basicness, but she also notes the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the various criteria and instructs the reader as to how such concepts may be applied to historical languages. Other topics canvassed in the first part of *The semantics of colour* include a discussion of nonbasic color terms (Ch. 4) and a discussion of the evolutionary sequence and its history in the thought of universalist researchers (Ch. 6), as well as an account of 'Different approaches' to understanding color nomenclature that do not depend on basicness at all (Ch. 7). While B is sympathetic to the critics of basicness, she believes the concept of the basic color term is very useful in historical studies.

The second half of the book, which details issues in historical semantics, implicitly proposes that a researcher should, once a list of color words for a domain of interest is specified, aim to determine the basic color terms in that domain as a methodological prelude to understanding its larger color nomenclature and, indeed, the color concepts of historical subjects. To that end, Ch. 5, 'Basic colour categories', introduces the important distinction between color names (basic color terms) and basic color CATEGORIES (color concepts). It is important not to conflate the two (as linguistic relativism may). A language may lack words to distinguish red from yellow, even though its speakers easily make such distinctions. Ch. 5 marks this difference and reminds the historical researcher to be wary of it (Gladstone made the mistake of asserting that the ancient Greeks could not see certain colors based on an analysis of their color words), yet B also lays her cards on the table when she writes that 'The assumption that BCTs [basic color terms] reveal underlying conceptual structure is broadly true' (59). This is a clever way to put things, since it will remain correct whether it is biology (broadly speaking) or culture (broadly speaking) or some mixture of the two that explains the conceptual structure of color categories, but it is also clear that B has only so much truck with the critics of basicness: she accepts both the linguistic and the cognitive dimensions of the Berlin and Kay universalist project.

In the second half of the book, B describes different types of historical studies of color words and concepts (synchronic, diachronic, and prehistoric—Chs. 9, 10, and 11, respectively). Each poses its own set of challenges, and each is illustrated with an example that constitutes a template for historical research. In her discussion of synchronic studies, B presents a detailed micro-study of the (cognate of the ModE) word *red* in a poem by Chaucer, *The parliament of fowls*. There are four appearances of *rede* or *red* in the poem, and for each B specifies the spelling, location in the text, referents as they appear in the text (e.g. a flower, a fish's fin, a rose), and associated terms (the context in which the terms appear). This fundamental scholarship in place, B asks some interesting questions: What red flower was Chaucer referring to? What species of fish has the red fins? What kind of rose? Section 3 of Ch. 9, 'Referents', takes us on a delightful intellectual investigation. For the instance where the referent of *rede* is a rose, B looks to determine which rose. *New flora of the British Isles* (Stace 1997) lists many roses, many of which are modern hybrids. So, which roses are listed as native, since Chaucer's rose is not modern? Of the twelve species listed, all are white or various shades of pink. Since white can be eliminated by virtue of contextual information in the poem, Chaucer's rose is very likely to be one of the pink species. But why would Chaucer call a pink rose *rede*? As B says, 'fourteenth century English people had no basic category for PINK so would, presumably, have referred to the rose colour as *rēd*' (134). There is more to the story of the pink rose that is called a red rose in Middle English, for it turns out that heraldic red-not-pink roses complicate the story further, but this is an example of how interesting

'interdisciplinary semantics' (137), as B calls it, can be. This reviewer has read some dreary accounts of color words in historical texts. Not only is B's work not dreary, but it is also designed to lift practitioners of semantic color studies up from the fog of mere description by providing them with a metatheory and a methodology whereby their studies can go deeper.

In 'Prehistoric colour studies' (Ch. 11), B argues that one can exploit comparative modern and historical evidence in juxtaposition to a commitment to Berlin and Kay's evolutionary sequence, in order to make inferences about the likely color categories present in the minds of prehistorical speakers. The least specific and therefore the most likely version of the evolutionary sequence (Kay & Maffi 1999) proposes that languages with only two basic terms distinguish light from dark, with terms for red/yellow/white and black/green/blue. Languages with three terms will differentiate as follows: white (or light), red/yellow, and black/green/blue (or dark). Red/yellow, then, is the first purely chromatic term that emerges according to the evolutionary hypothesis (which reconstructs a universally applicable schema from a cross-cultural, mainly nonwestern corpus). Comparative evidence from successor (daughter) languages might suggest a common root for 'red', say, and this could be construed as evidence for a reconstructed red term and/or category. (B makes an interesting case for such a reconstruction of a red category in Proto-Indo-European). The reasoning in this chapter exploits a range of speculative work: a modularist evolutionary psychology (Mithen 1996), the difficult 'vantage theory' (MacLaury 2002), and a particular brand of cognitive prototyping (Wierzbicka 1996). This makes Ch. 11 quite speculative, but it is also the most theoretically original discussion in the book.

In its first half, *The semantics of colour* provides an accurate and up-to-date account of research into basic color terms and categories. The second half of the book uses this conceptual framework in its articulation of various approaches to historical color semantics. While one can find discussions of research in the tradition of Berlin and Kay and many good studies of color nomenclature (some by B herself, not surprisingly), this book is unique in the way it links the two. It is also unique in its explicit emphasis on methodology and its original examples of historical color semantics: theory and practice are united. For researchers interested in the historical semantics of color, this book has no peer, and it will be their basic resource. For other readers, *The semantics of colour* is a first-rate interdisciplinary trip through the linguistics, history, psychology, and anthropology of color language and color concepts.

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Introduction to pragmatics. By BETTY J. BIRNER. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. Pp. x, 326. ISBN 9781405175838. \$44.95.

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This book is a textbook, so my remarks focus on how effectively it works for that purpose. I used it very successfully in my fall 2012 pragmatics class, a combination of an advanced under-