

Grammatical Transcategorization of Basic Color Terms: A Cognitive Analysis of English and Chinese

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Abstract

Color terms are important symbols in language that record human perception of the world, carrying both objective descriptive functions and rich cultural metaphorical meanings. English and Chinese exhibit significant differences in the usage of color terms, especially concerning grammatical transcategorization (shifting from nouns or adjectives to verbs). Based on the statistical findings of Liao Zhenggang (2011) from large corpora (COCA, CCL), and combined with cognitive linguistic theories, this paper explores the cognitive motivations behind the frequency differences in the grammatical transcategorization of basic color terms between English and Chinese. The study finds that the verbalization frequency of Chinese color terms is approximately ten times that of English; “红” (red) is the most frequently verbalized in Chinese, while “brown” ranks highest in English. This discrepancy stems from the interaction of three aspects: firstly, the isolating characteristic of Chinese leads to fuzzy boundaries between word classes; secondly, the degrees of conventionalization of conceptual metonymies involved in the verbalization of color terms, such as “Property for Change” and “Effect for Action”, differ between the two languages; thirdly, cultural models and experiential differences profoundly influence the semantic flexibility of color terms. This paper provides a systematic explanation for the phenomenon of grammatical transcategorization of color terms from a cognitive perspective and offers new insights for cross-linguistic comparative studies.

Keywords

Cognitive Linguistics; Color Terms; Conceptual Metonymy; Cross-linguistic Comparison

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Color is a crucial dimension in human perception and understanding of the objective world, and color terms are the fundamental linguistic symbols recording this per-

ceptual experience. They are not only used for objectively describing the colors of external things but also widely carry cultural, emotional, and psychological significance (Jiang Guanghua, 2007). For instance, in daily communication, “红” (red) can refer not only to an objective color but also metaphorically to “celebration,” “enthusiasm,” or “success”; “black” denotes both a color attribute and can extend to symbolic meanings like “sadness,” “illegality,” or “mystery.” Color terms thus serve as a core focal point for the interaction of language, cognition, and culture.

In cross-linguistic communication, color terms often contain rich cultural information and emotional value. Due to differences in color perception and categorization among different ethnic groups and cultures, even the same color term may present different usages and metaphorical meanings in different languages and contexts (Berlin & Kay, 1969). For example, English “green” is often associated with “envy,” while Chinese “绿” is more frequently linked to “life” and “nature.” This complex interplay of semantics and culture makes color terms an important area in linguistics, cognitive science, and cross-cultural studies.

1.2. Research Questions

In color term research, a long-neglected yet highly valuable phenomenon is grammatical transcategorization, i.e., the shift of color terms from nouns or adjectives to verbs. For example, in English, “The sky blueed.” involves blue shifting from an adjective to a verb; whereas in Chinese, “脸红了” (The face reddened) is a typical case of “红” shifting from an adjective to a verb. This flexible shift in word class is not merely a grammatical change but reflects the cognitive patterns of language users during conceptualization.

Liao Zhenggang’s (2011) research, based on the large corpora COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) and CCL (Peking University Modern Chinese Corpus), found significant differences in the verbalization frequency of color terms between English and Chinese: the verbalization frequency of Chinese color terms is about 10 times that of English. For instance, “红” is the most frequently verbalized in Chinese, while “brown” ranks first in English; simultaneously, “褐” (brown) has almost no verbalization instances in Chinese. These quantitative findings provide a solid factual basis for studying the differences in grammatical transcategorization of color terms between English and Chinese, but existing research still lacks an in-depth explanation for the cognitive motivations behind this difference.

Based on this, using Liao Zhenggang’s (2011) quantitative results as a foundation and employing a cognitive linguistic theoretical perspective, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

- Why do significant frequency differences exist in the grammatical transcategorization of basic color terms between English and Chinese?
- What are the cognitive mechanisms underlying these differences?
- What roles do cultural models, typological features, and experiential basis play

in this phenomenon ?

1.3. Research Objectives

This study aims to explain the deep motivations behind the frequency differences in the grammatical transcategorization of basic color terms between English and Chinese from a cognitive linguistic perspective, rather than merely remaining at the level of statistical description of linguistic phenomena. By introducing Langacker's (1987, 2008) Cognitive Grammar theory, Radden & Kövecses' (1999) Conceptual Metonymy theory, and Rosch's (1978) Prototype Theory, this paper will explore how the verbalization of color terms originates from different conceptualization methods and cognitive models.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Basis of Basic Color Terms

Color term research has long been a key topic at the intersection of linguistics, cognitive science, and anthropology. Berlin and Kay's (1969) theory of basic color terms was a milestone in this field. Through large-scale comparisons of 98 languages, they found that although different languages vary in their division of color categories, the linguistic classification of colors is not entirely arbitrary but exhibits cross-linguistic consistency. They proposed criteria for "Basic Color Terms" (BCTs):

- Cannot be subsumed under another color term;
- Are widely used and stable in the language;
- Are not dependent on the combination of other color terms.

On this basis, Berlin & Kay proposed that English has 11 basic color terms: white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, grey. The research also found that even across different languages, the cognitive foci (focal colors) are relatively consistent, for instance, the "best red" showed high convergence in cross-cultural tests. This finding established the cross-linguistic cognitive basis for color term research.

In Chinese research, scholars like Wang Fengxin (2001) and Li Hongyin (2004) have conducted in-depth explorations of the Chinese basic color term system. Li Hongyin pointed out that the Chinese color term system exhibits a high degree of semantic flexibility, especially in its syntactic functions encompassing noun, adjective, and even verb characteristics. This resonates with the universality theory proposed by Berlin & Kay but also reveals the uniqueness of Chinese in color categorization. For example, the generally recognized 9 basic color terms in Chinese are “白, 黑, 红, 黄, 绿, 蓝, 褐, 紫, 灰” (white, black, red, yellow, green, blue, brown, purple, grey), roughly corresponding to the 11 English color terms, but significant differences exist in grammatical usage and cognitive processing.

Therefore, Berlin & Kay's cross-linguistic research and the native research of Chi-

nese scholars complement each other, jointly laying a solid theoretical foundation for this paper's analysis of the grammatical transcategorization of color terms in English and Chinese.

2.2. Research on Grammatical Transcategorization and Cognitive Linguistics

2.2.1. Cognitive Grammar and the Dynamic Nature of Word Classes

Cognitive linguistics posits that word classes are not solely determined by formal features or syntactic distribution but are closely related to conceptual basis and construal methods (Langacker, 1987, 2008). Within the framework of Cognitive Grammar, nouns tend to profile a 'thing', adjectives profile a 'property', and verbs profile a 'process'. Therefore, when a color term shifts from a noun or adjective to a verb, it essentially involves language users reconceptualizing a static property as a dynamic change process in their conceptualization.

For example, in English, blue in "The sky blueed." no longer refers to the static color "blue" but profiles the process of "the sky becoming blue"; in Chinese, "红" in "脸红了" similarly accomplishes the cognitive transformation from property to change. This grammatical transcategorization is not a random syntactic phenomenon but the externalization of a deep cognitive process.

2.2.2. Conceptual Metonymy and the Verbalization of Color Terms

Radden & Kövecses (1999) point out that conceptual metonymy is an important cognitive motivation for the verbalization of color terms. This paper primarily involves two metonymic mechanisms:

PROPERTY FOR CHANGE: When we say "叶子绿了" (The leaves greened), we are actually using the property "绿" (green) to stand for the process of "turning green". The cognitive focus shifts from the result to the change process leading to the result, thereby assigning verbal function to the color term.

EFFECT FOR ACTION: Color change is usually caused by some action. For example, "肉黑了" (The meat blackened) implies the process of "the meat being burnt" or "the meat spoiling"; similarly, English "browning the meat" maps the final color result onto the action that caused it.

These two metonymies explain why color terms can naturally cross word class boundaries: we infer the process from the result, mapping a static property onto a dynamic change.

2.2.3. Prototype Theory and the Verbalization Potential of Color Terms

Rosch's (1978) Prototype Theory states that members of a category have different psychological salience, with prototypical items being more easily activated and having cognitive advantages. Applied to color term research, psychologically salient prototype colors like black, white, and red are more prone to grammatical transcat-

egorization. For example, Liao Zhenggang's (2011) corpus statistics show that “红” is the most frequently verbalized in Chinese, while “褐” has almost no verbalization instances, precisely reflecting the influence of the prototype effect on language use.

2.2.4. The Influence of Cultural Cognitive Models on Color Terms

The grammatical and semantic usage of color terms is also shaped by cultural cognitive models (Lakoff, 1987). For instance, in Chinese culture, “红” is highly associated with “celebration, success, power,” hence its higher frequency in metaphorical and verbal usage; whereas in the English context, “brown” becomes the most frequently verbalized color term due to the importance of Western cooking culture. This indicates that the cognitive motivations for the grammatical transcategorization of color terms are not singular but the product of multi-dimensional interaction among language, culture, and experience.

3. Theoretical Framework & Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts cognitive linguistics as the overarching research perspective, comprehensively utilizing four theoretical frameworks: Cognitive Grammar, Conceptual Metonymy Theory, Prototype Theory, and Cultural Cognitive Models, to explain the differences in the grammatical transcategorization of basic color terms between English and Chinese.

3.1.1. Cognitive Grammar

Proposed by Langacker (1987, 1991, 2008), the core view of Cognitive Grammar is that grammar is not an abstract rule system independent of meaning but a reflection of the conceptualization process. In this theory, word classes are not uniquely determined by formal features or syntactic position but are closely related to how that profiles things, properties, and processes.

- Nouns: Profile a ‘thing’, i.e., a relatively stable conceptual unit.
- Adjectives: Profile a ‘property’, describing the static characteristics of a thing.
- Verbs: Profile a ‘process’, expressing a change of state or event progression.

The grammatical transcategorization of color terms essentially involves language users reconceptualizing a color property in their conceptualization, causing it to shift from a static ‘state’ to a dynamic ‘process’. For example:

In English “*The sky blued.*”, blue shifts from adjective to verb, profiling the process of “the sky becoming blue”. While in Chinese “脸红了”, “红” similarly achieves a dynamic construal from property to state change. Therefore, the verbalization of color terms is not an arbitrary syntactic phenomenon but the result of a shift in conceptual focus: the speaker chooses to reconstrue the ‘final color state’ as the ‘process of color change’, and the grammatical form adjusts accordingly.

3.1.2. Conceptual Metonymy Theory

Radden & Kövecses (1999) point out that conceptual metonymy is not merely a linguistic rhetorical phenomenon but a core cognitive mechanism for human knowledge organization. The verbalization of color terms largely relies on the following two metonymic patterns: When we say “叶子绿了” (The leaves greened), we are actually using the color property “绿” (green) to stand for the ‘process of turning green’. The cognitive focus shifts from the final state to the process of achieving that state, giving the color term a natural verbal function. Color change is usually the result triggered by some action. For example:

Chinese: “肉黑了” (The meat blackened) actually implies the action of “the meat burning/rotting”.

English: “brown the meat” in cooking, maps the “brown result” onto the “frying/roasting action”.

These two metonymies reveal the cognitive motivation behind the grammatical transcategorization of color terms: humans tend to infer the ‘implied process’ through the ‘visible result’. Therefore, the semantics of verbalization are not mechanically pieced together but are natural associations in cognition.

3.1.3. Prototype Theory

Rosch’s (1978) Prototype Theory states that psychological salience varies among members within a category, with prototypical items being more easily profiled and activated. Applied to color term research, basic color terms with high psychological salience (e.g., “黑, 白, 红”) have stronger verbalization potential in grammatical transcategorization, while color terms with low salience (e.g., “褐”) are less likely to be converted into verbs. This is verified in Liao Zhenggang’s (2011) corpus statistics: in Chinese, “红” ranks first in verbalization instances, with extremely high semantic flexibility; in English, “brown” is frequently verbalized in cooking contexts; Chinese “褐”, due to its low psychological salience and low usage frequency, has almost no verbalization instances in the CCL corpus. Therefore, the prototype effect not only influences semantic cognition but also directly shapes the frequency patterns of grammatical usage.

3.1.4. Cultural Cognitive Models

Lakoff (1987) pointed out that the organization of concepts in language is deeply influenced by cultural models. The grammatical and semantic usage of color terms is closely related to cultural experiences. In Chinese culture, “红” is highly associated with “celebration, success, power,” as in “红榜” (honor roll), “走红” (become popular), which promotes its semantic and grammatical flexibility and facilitates its high-frequency verbalization. In Western culture, “brown” is highly correlated with experiences in cooking, crafts, dyeing, etc., thus naturally forming verbalization patterns in contexts like brown the meat. Different cultures’ attention to specific colors

directly influences their frequency of use. For example, Chinese rarely uses “褐” alone, preferring compound expressions like “棕褐色” (brownish), “咖啡色” (coffee color), resulting in scarce verbalization instances. Thus, language type, cognitive mechanisms, and cultural models jointly shape the regular differences in the grammatical transcategorization of color terms.

3.2. Research Methods

This paper adopts a corpus-driven + theoretical explanation research paradigm. Specific methods include:

3.2.1. Corpus Basis

This paper takes Liao Zhenggang's (2011) statistical results based on COCA and CCL as its starting point, utilizing large-scale corpus analysis of the verbalization frequency differences of basic color terms in English and Chinese to provide a factual basis for cognitive analysis.

3.2.2. Qualitative Analysis

Based on corpus statistics, this paper conducts in-depth cognitive analysis of typical example sentences, combining Langacker's 'conceptual re-construal' and Radden & Kövecses' 'Property for Change' model to explain the cognitive mechanisms of color term grammatical transcategorization.

3.2.3. Comparative Analysis

Through parallel analysis of English and Chinese, this paper compares the semantic projection paths, metonymic mechanisms, and cultural influences of different color terms during verbalization, revealing the interaction between language systems and cultural models.

3.2.4. Interdisciplinary Integration

This paper integrates theoretical results from linguistics, cognitive science, and cultural studies to provide a multi-dimensional analytical framework for explaining the phenomenon of color term grammatical transcategorization.

4. Cognitive Explanation of Frequency Differences

In Liao Zhenggang's (2011) statistical results based on COCA and CCL, the frequency difference in the grammatical transcategorization of basic color terms between English and Chinese is very significant: the verbalization frequency of Chinese color terms is about 10 times that of English. For example, in CCL, “红” is the most frequently verbalized, while “褐” has almost no verbalization instances; in COCA, “brown” ranks first, while verbalization instances for “blue”, “purple”, etc., are relatively fewer. This fact raises a core question: Why do such huge differences exist in

the overall frequency and specific distribution of color term verbalization between the two languages ?

Based on the cognitive linguistic theoretical framework, this paper provides a systematic explanation of this phenomenon from multiple perspectives including linguistic typology, conceptual metonymy, prototype effect, and cultural cognitive models.

4.1. Overall Frequency Differences and Linguistic Motivations

4.1.1. The ‘Noun-Verb Inclusion’ Feature of Chinese

Shen Jiaxuan (2009) proposed that nouns, verbs, and adjectives in Chinese exhibit an inclusive relationship: nouns contain verbal potential, verbs contain adjectival functions. This fuzziness of word classes makes Chinese syntax more flexible, especially in the conversion of adjectives like color terms into verbs, which is more natural.

For example:

“叶子绿了” (The leaves greened) “绿” shifts from adjective to verb without any morphological change.

“脸红了” (The face reddened) “红” similarly directly serves as the predicate, indicating a state change.

In Chinese, word class boundaries rely on contextual inference rather than morphological markers, so the cognitive cost of verbalization is lower, leading to the high-frequency occurrence of color term verbalization in actual pragmatics.

4.1.2. The Inflectional Feature of English

In contrast, English, as an inflectional language, has relatively fixed word class boundaries. If a color term is converted into a verb, it usually requires morphological markers, such as adding -en, -ing:

black → blacken

white → whiten

brown → browning the meat

This need for morphological markers, an ‘explicit operation’, means that color term verbalization is not the norm in the English language system but a special expression. Therefore, the lower verbalization frequency of English color terms is a direct reflection of typological differences.

4.1.3. Direct Scanning and Distal Construal from a Cognitive Perspective

Langacker (2008) points out that linguistic typological differences are closely related to cognitive patterns:

Chinese tends towards ‘direct scanning’, treating a certain state directly as a dynamic process, lacking explicit markers. English leans more towards ‘distal construal’, treating the change process as a special event, explicitly distinguished through

morphological markers.

Therefore, color term verbalization in Chinese is a more natural choice both cognitively and grammatically, while English is constrained by morphological rules.

4.2. Differences in Metonymic Mechanisms and Degrees of Conventionalization

4.2.1. High Conventionalization in Chinese

In Chinese, the PROPERTY FOR CHANGE metonymy is extremely common. For example:

“天黑了” (The sky blackened) “黑” represents the ‘process of becoming dark’.

“树叶黄了” (The leaves yellowed) “黄” indicates the ‘dynamic process of turning yellow’.

This metonymy is highly conventionalized in everyday language; users can understand the verbal meaning through context almost without the need for explicit markers or additional explanation. This highly conventionalized cognitive model gives Chinese greater ‘barrier-free’ capability in grammatical transcategorization.

4.2.2. Low Conventionalization in English

Although similar metonymies exist in English, such as:

The sky darkened.

Her cheeks reddened.

This usage is relatively more formal and limited to specific verbal constructions (like adding -en). In spoken language, English tends to use explicit expressions:

The leaves turned yellow.

The sky became blue.

This means that the verbalization pattern of PROPERTY FOR CHANGE is not fully conventionalized in English, resulting in a relatively lower frequency of color term verbalization.

4.3. The High-Frequency Verbalization of “红” and “Brown”

In the specific distribution of color term verbalization, English and Chinese show significant differences: Chinese “红” is the most frequently verbalized, while English “brown” has the highest verbalization frequency. This difference stems from the dual role of experiential basis and cultural models.

4.3.1. High-Frequency Verbalization of “红”

“红” is one of the most easily perceived colors by humans, particularly salient in body-related experiences. “脸红” (face reddens) reflects physiological reactions to emotions like anger, shyness, or nervousness. “眼睛红了” (eyes redden) expresses the state after fatigue or crying. This strong physiological-emotional connection gives “红” extremely high cognitive activatability.

In Chinese culture, “红” symbolizes “celebration, success, good luck,” as in “红榜” (honor roll), “走红” (become popular), “开门红” (get off to a good start). This metaphorical projection gives “红” multiple semantic spaces within the conceptual network, increasing its grammatical operability. Therefore, “红” becomes the most easily verbalized and semantically flexible color term in Chinese.

4.3.2. High-Frequency Verbalization of “Brown”

Unlike “红”, the high-frequency verbalization of “brown” in English mainly originates from specific scenarios like cooking, crafts, and dyeing:

Brown the meat before adding the sauce.

The bread browned nicely.

This high-frequency use reflects that the life experiences associated with “brown” in English culture are more direct and explicit, rather than abstract cultural symbols.

4.4. The Low Salience of “褐”

Liao Zhenggang’s (2011) corpus statistics indicate that “褐” has almost no verbalization instances in CCL. This phenomenon can be explained by Prototype Theory.

4.4.1. Low Salience of “褐”

According to Rosch’s (1978) Prototype Theory, the psychological salience of “褐” in the Chinese color system is relatively low. Unlike high-prototypicality colors like “红”, “黑”, “白”, “褐” is not a highly prominent color category in Chinese culture; compound forms like “棕褐色”, “咖啡色” are more common in daily expressions.

4.4.2. Cumulative Effect of Low Usage Frequency

Low psychological salience leads to low usage frequency, and low frequency further reduces the possibility of grammatical transcategorization, forming a cycle of ‘low frequency → low verbalization’. This phenomenon reflects the profound influence of the prototype effect on language use.

4.5. Interaction of Language, Cognition, and Culture

Synthesizing the above analysis, the differences in color term verbalization between English and Chinese cannot be explained by a single factor but are the result of the interaction among language type, cognitive mechanisms, and cultural experience:

Table 1. Differences in color term verbalization between English and Chinese.

Dimension	Chinese	English
Language Type	Isolating, fuzzy word class boundaries, natural verbalization	Inflectional, requires morphological markers, restricted verbalization
Metonymy Conventionalization	PROPERTY FOR CHANGE highly conventionalized	PROPERTY FOR CHANGE lowly conventionalized
Prototype Effect	High salience colors (红, 白, 黑) verbalize significantly	High salience colors (brown, black) verbalize frequently
Cultural Model	Red symbolizes success, celebration	Brown highly associated with

	(high verbalization)	cooking
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It can be seen that language structure shapes the possibility of word class conversion, cognitive mechanisms influence the path of semantic activation, and cultural experience further reinforces the semantic flexibility of certain color terms. The three interact, ultimately forming the significant differences in color term verbalization between English and Chinese.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Research Conclusions

Based on Liao Zhenggang’s (2011) corpus statistics from COCA and CCL, and combined with cognitive linguistic theories, this paper systematically analyzed the significant differences in the grammatical transcategorization of basic color terms between English and Chinese and their cognitive motivations. The research shows that the verbalization frequency of Chinese color terms is significantly higher than that of English, and the two languages exhibit regular differences in the distribution of verbalization across different color terms. In Chinese, “红” is the most frequently verbalized, followed by “白” and “黑”, while “褐” has almost no verbalization instances. In English, “brown” has the highest verbalization frequency, mainly concentrated in specific scenarios like cooking and dyeing.

The cognitive analysis in this paper indicates that this difference is not accidental but the result of the interaction of three factors: language structure, cognitive mechanisms, and cultural experience. First, Chinese, as an isolating language, has fuzzy word class boundaries, allowing color terms to more easily function directly as predicates; English, as an inflectional language, relies on morphological markers for verbalization, restricting its use. Second, the conceptual metonymy PROPERTY FOR CHANGE is highly conventionalized in Chinese, making color term verbalization a natural expression; whereas the degree of conventionalization of this metonymic pattern is lower in English. Third, in Chinese culture, “红” carries symbolic meanings like celebration and success, reinforcing its semantic flexibility; in the English context, “brown” is closely related to cooking culture, leading to its high-frequency verbalization in specific scenarios. Therefore, the phenomenon of color term verbalization is shaped by the combined forces of language type, cognitive patterns, and cultural models.

5.2. Theoretical and Practical Value

The main contribution of this research lies in providing a systematic explanation for the differences in the grammatical transcategorization of English and Chinese color terms from a cognitive linguistic perspective, supplementing the explanatory shortcomings in Liao Zhenggang (2011). Its theoretical value lies in:

- Combining Cognitive Grammar, Conceptual Metonymy Theory, Prototype Theory, and Cultural Cognitive Models to construct a multi-dimensional analytical

framework;

- Revealing the interaction of language type, cognitive mechanisms, and cultural experience in cross-linguistic comparative studies.
- On a practical level, this research provides a cognitive basis for translation studies, foreign language teaching, and cross-cultural communication. For example, English “brown the meat” carries specific cultural connotations in cooking contexts; if mechanically translated as “把肉变褐”, it might cause misunderstanding; similarly, the metaphorical meaning of Chinese “走红” needs explanation in cross-cultural communication.

5.3. Research Limitations and Future Prospects

Although this paper attempts theoretical analysis and corpus integration, the following limitations remain:

- Limitations of Corpus Sources: This paper primarily relies on Liao Zhenggang’s (2011) statistical data. Future research could expand to larger-scale, more specialized parallel corpora, such as news, social media, and film/television corpora.
- Lack of Cognitive Experiments: This paper reasons from theory and corpus but lacks validation from behavioral or neurocognitive experiments. Future research could combine eye-tracking experiments or ERP techniques to verify the psychological processing patterns of color term verbalization.
- Insufficient Depth in Cross-Cultural Perspective: This paper mainly analyzes Chinese and English. Future research could expand to multi-language studies, for example, comparing the verbalization patterns of color terms in Chinese, English, Japanese, and French to reveal more universal cognitive patterns.

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