The ʕAzāzmih Color System: Arabic Lexicon and Ancient Egyptian Categories

Grounded in perception, color categories (CCs) apparently follow universal rules (Berlin & Kay, 1969), yet linguistic diversity reveals language's deterministic effects on cognition (Roberson et al., 2005). Studies have focused on color terms' (CTs) etymology and CC extension (Bulakh, 2007; Fischer, 1965; Hess, 1920), symbolism (Al-Jehani, 1990; Roth, 1986), and basic color terms' typology (BCTs; Borg, 1999; 2007). I compare linguistic and cognitive CCs in ʕAzāzmih Arabic elicited from 8 women/men over age 70, speakers of the traditional language, in central/southern Negev encampments (Shawarbah, 2012). Linguistic data comes from spontaneous speech (on animal coats/embroidery/textures/colors of earth/vegetation/human complexion), direct questions (*ayy lawn x*?, 'which color is x?'), and stimuli including: 1. naming tasks on a Münsell chart (MC; Majid, 2008; Majid & Levinson, 2007) (I first submitted color chips randomly, then in MC order), 2. culture-specific stimuli to elicit CCs' association with objects/materials; 3. conversational tasks (informant A, given a configuration of color chips, had to explain to B, out of sight, how to arrange the same chips to replicate the stimulus configuration). In cognitive tasks, each informant observed a sign's position on the MC, the stimulus was removed, and two minutes later the informant had to place the sign in the same position on a new MC, draw the boundaries between colors on the MC, and gather stimuli chips, pictures, and objects in as many chromatic groups as s/he wanted. Linguistic results show the coexistence of hue CCs (modern objects/embroidery/textures/distinction of contiguous colors), desaturated CCs for natural elements (earth/wild animals/human physical qualities), and brightness CCs based on contrasts and surface effects (Biggam, 2007), used for domestic animal coats. For example, *aḥmar* (red) as a hue stretches from focal red to saturated pink; as a desaturated CC, *aḥmar* designates natural colors from pale yellow to light brown, meaning 'dry' (for plants); as a brightness CC, *aḥmar* means colored/polychrome/dark. In cognitive results, the three systems coexist, strongly connected to stimuli type and quality. This coexistence appears in symbolic uses, producing polysemy. Hue CCs, based on warm/cold opposition, are related to the decoration of women's dresses, where *aḥmar*, fertility/life, opposes *azraq* (blue)/*axẓar* (green), infertility. In desaturated CCs, based on the opposition dry-clear/wet-dark, *aḥmar* means drought/death, and opposes *axẓar* ('green'/'wet' for laundry/'hydrated', for skin); in brightness CCs, based on the opposition colored/uncolored, *aḥmar* is the BCT for 'black,' opposing *abyaẓ* (white/uncolored/pale). This typologically extraordinary coexistence and interplay of three systems is found in ancient Egyptian (Baines, 1985; Quirke, 2001; Schenkel, 2007; Takács, 1999; Warburton, 2007). Striking Egyptian/ʕAzāzmih parallels, such as the physical/social designations of skin colors and the 'paradoxical' use of both *aḥmar* and *axẓar* for fertility and death, are due to the interplay of BCTs' evolutionary paths. In hue's path *aḥmar* is 'warm' and *axẓar* 'cold,' in desaturation's path *aḥmar* is 'dry/light' and *axẓar* 'wet/dark', in brightness, *aḥmar* is a dark CC. While Aramaic CCs represent the substratum of Levantine sedentary Arabic BCTs (Borg, 2007), ʕAzāzmih reveals contact with ancient Egyptian CCs.

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